The Imperial Japanese Army's July Offensives

3

Overview

The major fighting at Nomonhan in July and August may be conveniently divided into two phases. During the first phase, roughly the month of July, the IJA launched two major offensives against the Red Army but ultimately failed to dislodge the superior Soviet forces. IJA losses in men and equipment resulting from the failed offensives forced the IJA on to the defensive from late July through the remainder of the battle.

Based on the advice of Kwantung Army Headquarters staff officers MAJ Tsuji Masanobu and LTC Hattori Takushiro, Lieutenant General Komatsubara decided on an enveloping attack.[1] His main force (71st and 72d Infantry Regiments, 23d Division, 13th Field Artillery Regiment and 23d Engineer Regiment with the 26th Infantry Regiment, 7th Division, in reserve) would eliminate Soviet forces around Hill 721, then cross the Halha River and drive south to the Kawamata Bridge, destroying Soviet artillery batteries and supply dumps along the west bank. Simultaneously, the Yasuoka Task Force (64th Infantry, 2/28th Infantry, 3d and 4th Armored Regiments, 1st Independent Field Artillery Regiment and 24th Independent Engineer Regiment) would attack Soviet forces on the Halha's east bank, north of the Holsten River. The link-up of the two pincer columns would first encircle the Soviet forces and then squeeze them to death. The plan differed from Colonel Yamagata's earlier abortive one in two respects. First, the Japanese believed that their flanking movement would force the Soviets to withdraw from the Halha's east bank. Second, the Japanese maneuver would violate the international border that the Japanese themselves maintained was the boundary between Manchukuo and Outer Mongolia.

The northern Japanese force seized Hill 721 on 2 July according to plan and that night crossed the Halha. The attacking Japanese forces had initial success storming Baintsagan Hill and then pushing south along that ridgeline for almost six kilometers. Farther south, however, superior Soviet artillery fired from Dungar-Obo Hill down on the advancing Japanese. Then Soviet counterattacks from three sides involving more than 450 tanks and armored cars blunted the spearhead of the Japanese attack. The heavy fighting on the west bank rapidly reduced Japanese equipment, ammunition, and personnel. The single pontoon bridge which the Japanese threw across the Halha could not sustain the major resupply effort that the embattled IJA

Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

Soviet artillery fire on 5 July against Yamagata unit, 64th Infantry Regiment.

units required to continue the battle.[2] Facing encirclement, the Japanese withdrew to the east bank, accomplishing that retrograde movement by 5 July. During the same three days, the Yasuoka Task Force had been fighting an equally determined Soviet foe on the Halha's east bank.

LTG Yasuoka Masaomi, commander of Japanese units operating on the east side of the Halha, had the mission to drive Soviet troops back from the Halha's east bank. Yasuoka detailed the 2/28th Infantry to cover his right flank and designated his two armor regiments to commence pursuit operations against an enemy who, based on erroneous intelligence,[3] he mistakenly thought was in full retreat. Yasuoka ordered a hurried pursuit operation. He sacrificed planning time for speed, but in the process he also sacrificed coordination among his infantry, artillery, and armor units.

According to Japanese armor doctrine tanks were infantry support vehicles that destroyed enemy heavy weapons and crushed obstacles and barbed wire entanglements to clear a path for the advancing foot soldiers.[4] In pursuit operations Japanese tanks were supposed to chase the retreating foe to disorganize any attempts to regroup. This pursuit operation was somewhat different because terrain dictated that the Soviet artillery positioned on the west bank could easily pour effective observed fire on Japanese tanks as they tried to advance down the basinlike slopes toward the Halha's east bank. A daylight attack would be murderous, but in a night attack the tanks had a chance of breaking into the enemy lines and reaching the Kawamata Bridge. However, the darkness also made coordination among advancing Japanese units difficult, moreso because the Japanese lacked sufficient wireless equipment, flares, and obser-

vation devices. The tankers, moreover, had only a vague idea of the enemy's location, the enemy's strength, or the type of terrain to be crossed to reach the foe. They expected that the pursuit, by keeping Japanese troops close to the retreating Soviets, would exert "psychological pressure" and disrupt the enemy.[5] Thus, on the night of 2—3 July there began a wild night attack characterized by individual units conducting independent battles in a driving rainstorm and resulting in the loss of about half the Japanese armor.

Meeting Engagement

In the predawn darkness of 3 July, troops of the 28th Infantry made preparations for their own dawn attack while listening to the artillery and rifle fire emanating from the scattered engagements of the Yasuoka Detachment. The 2/28th had moved from Chiangchunmiao into position on Hill 726 during the night of 2 July under orders to follow rapidly the already departed Yasuoka Force. The battalion's mission was to provide right flank security for the main Yasuoka forces and to conduct a reconniassance probe of enemy dispositions on the Halha's east bank. Large scale maps of the Nomonhan area were lacking, so the probe would also serve the double purpose of reconnoitering terrain for future combat operations. For protection against Soviet tanks, regimental headquarters temporarily attached a 37-mm antitank artillery company to the battalion's command. At 0600 on 3 July, the 2/28th Infantry, in the words in its unit history, "determined to join the battle, moved toward the sound of the guns."[6]

The battalion advanced according to the manual. Rifle squads, whose members camouflaged themselves with branches of scrub willow, provided flank and forward security as the battalion's three rifle companies advanced, two companies forward with one in reserve. On the left flank, 6th Company, under Captain Tsuji, reinforced with two heavy machine guns, moved in a southeast direction while 5th Company, commanded by Captain Aoyagi, also reinforced with two heavy machine guns, followed a parallel course on the right flank. A platoon from 5th Company secured the western, or right flank of the advance. First Lieutenant Saito led 7th Company, which brought up the rear. Battalion artillery and the antitank company remained close to the lead companies ready to deploy in order to suppress hostile fire, should the occasion arise.

As the untested infantrymen moved nervously along ridgelines or trails toward the Halha River, they saw Japanese fighters protect infantrymen from about twenty Soviet aircraft which were trying to bomb and strafe the ground troops at low level. When one Soviet aircraft exploded and crashed, the rest fled across the Halha. Encouraged by this successful conclusion to the first clash of arms they had ever witnessed, the troops picked up their pace and covered the ground along the ridgelines more rapidly despite scattered sniper fire. The hot desert sun and 34° C (94° F) temperatures were proving to be a greater enemy than the Soviets.

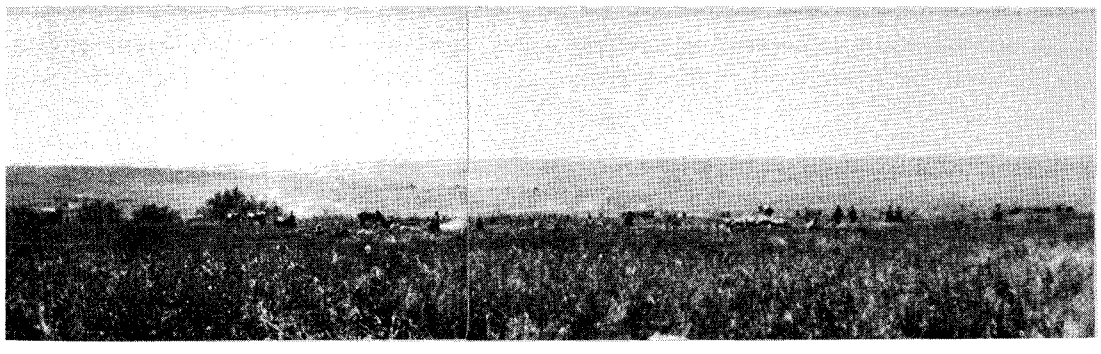
Despite the sweltering heat, the 2/28th Infantry had to move quickly because moving at night over unfamiliar terrain had delayed its arrival time at the line of departure. Consequently the unit had deployed for its attack preparations several hours later than

Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

Japanese troops in paddy near Halha River. Note field periscope binoculars.

the armored force and began to advance twelve hours after the tanks had rolled forward. This lag became more and more important as the hours passed because the Yasuoka Force depended on the 2/28th Infantry's probe of suspected enemy left flank positions to provide intelligence information for the conduct of future operations. Lacking communication with the 64th Infantry, which was the right wing of the Yasuoka Force, the 2/28th Infantry could not provide this crucial battlefield intelligence when the attacking Yasuoka Force most needed it.[7]

Later that day when isolated enemy machine guns or pockets of two or three riflemen tried to impede the sweep, the battalion's heavy machine guns and 70-mm artillery crews deployed just as the training manual prescribed and suppressed the hostile fire, allowing the infantry's advance to continue. Officers attributed this light resistance, probably by the machine gun battalion of the 9th Motorized Armored Brigade, to the enemy's concentrating all his artillery on the 23d Division, which was pushing down from the north.



Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

Japanese troops east of Halha River watching dust trails of Soviet armor on west bank.

After a day spent chasing individual Soviet troops, the battalion formed its night defensive position with all three companies on line forming an arc-like perimeter. Tents were pitched. Rifle squads on the flanks and rear served as security with the heavy machine gun company, battalion, artillery, and headquarters at the center of the defensive position. According to Japanese firing diagrams, the battalion believed that at dusk of 3 July it faced about two companies of Soviet infantry supported by five or six tanks.

Major Kajikawa then sent scouts to locate the Yasuoka Detachment. The scouts accomplished their mission and established contact with 8th Company, 64th Infantry, the right flank of the Yasuoka Detachment. Thus 4 July began well and improved as by mid-morning the battalion had already pushed another 1,000 meters south from their overnight encampment without opposition. Even the sudden appearance of a Soviet fighter aircraft roaring in at low level to strafe the troops while they were eating their mid-day rations did not interfere with operations. After the Japanese picked themselves up off the ground and found no one hurt, they joked about the inept Soviet pilots, which boosted their morale.

That afternoon their advance continued as sharpshooters and machine gunners of the two lead Japanese companies, assisted by the 70-mm howitzers, scattered the already retreating Soviet infantrymen. The sun proved a greater enemy than the Soviets. The Japanese battled the scorching 40° C (102° F) heat, thirst, and fatigue as a few of their comrades fought scattered running gun battles over sand dunes throughout the day against a Soviet rear guard force. That day the Japanese collected eight Soviet corpses and took a prisoner. They also discovered five destroyed trucks and one smashed 45-mm antitank gun. Water, however, was becoming short as the heat, dust, and anxiety of a combat operation combined to dry both mouths and canteens.

Soviet resistance seemed extremely weak. The enemy showed little inclination to stand and to fight. Major Kajikawa and his aide-de-camp, First Lieutenant Muranaka, attributed this ineffectual enemy performance to the results of the combined 23d Division and Yasuoka Detachment attacks which, they decided, must have uncovered the weakness in the enemy defenses and thus thrown the Soviets into confusion. To add to the disorder, that night Kajikawa sent raiding parties behind Soviet lines to destroy the Kawamata Bridge, the lifeline of Soviet troops on the Halha's east bank.

The patrol comprised two groups of three men each. Captain Aoyagi, commander of 5th Company, led two of his men and Sergeant Hirai led two second class privates from 7th Company. Near the bridge Sergeant Hirai discovered a Soviet heavy machine gun platoon and the other group found Soviet tanks and armored cars. Unable to get through such heavy security forces, and with dawn approaching, Hirai's group crawled to within fifty meters of the Soviet position and planted two land mines along the road leading east from the bridge. Shortly afterwards Soviet tanks clanked across the bridge and moved east in parallel columns. As the patrol watched, the lead tank passed over their mines and exploded violently. The Soviet machine gun post came alive, blasting wildly into the early dawn light.[8] Taking advantage of the

poor light, the three Japanese dashed for some shrubs near the river bank and there used their helmets to scoop out a hole large enough to conceal themselves beneath the sparse foliage. They spent the entire day listening to Soviet patrols crisscrossing the area. That night the three made their way back to their lines.[9]

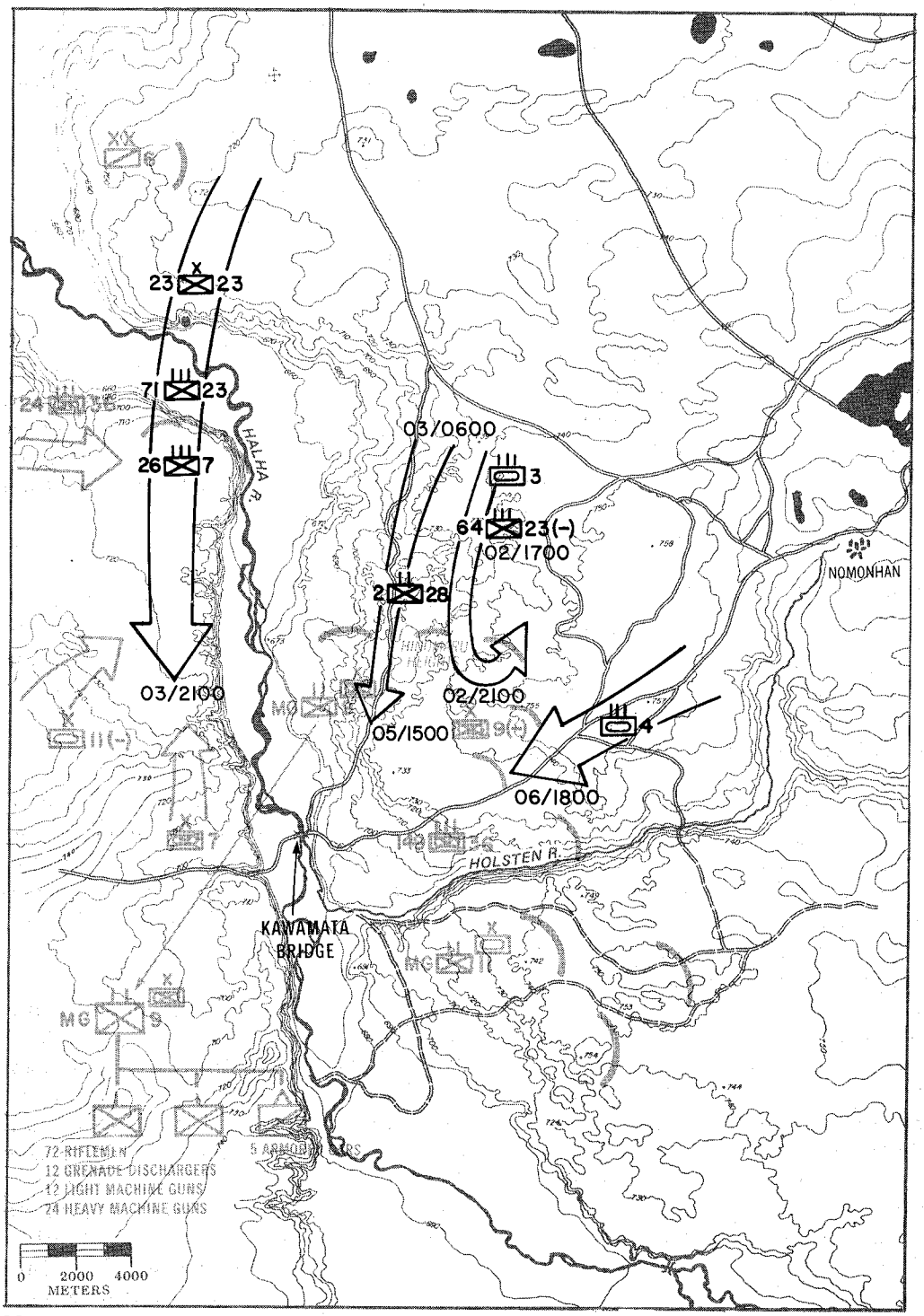
Meanwhile, other officer-led patrols on the night of 4—5 July reported to battalion that the approaches to the Kawamata Bridge seemed lightly defended. The Soviets apparently relied on wire entanglements, dubbed "piano wire" by the Japanese, to protect the bridge. This thin, almost invisible wire, lay coiled in grass or in shallow depressions to ensnare the unwary infantryman's ankles or, if he were crawling, his shoulders and torso. Despite having encountered a similar impediment at Changkufeng almost a year earlier, the IJA apparently had devised no adequate countermeasures to hasten troop passage through this time-consuming and painful obstacle.

Based on this intelligence, Major Kajikawa ordered a dawn attack for 5 July. In poor visibility because of a light rain at dawn, Kajikawa sent his 5th and 7th Companies forward. Maneuvering against an estimated three companies of enemy soldiers supported by fifteen tanks, 7th Company soon made contact with company-size elements of the 64th Infantry on its left flank. Kajikawa, mounted on horseback for greater mobility, then assumed direct command of the 7th company to supervise the attack and to maintain liaison with the 64th Infantry.

Taking advantage of folds in the ground, sand dunes, and depressions for cover, 5th and 7th Companies employed fire and movement tactics to advance about 1,500 meters. Riflemen would dash forward to the next suitable ground concealment and from there fire at enemy strongpoints to keep Soviet weapons crews pinned down so that other Japanese infantrymen could rush forward. (See Map 10.)

Nothing of the previous two days' fighting prepared the Japanese soldiers for the action of 5 July. On this day the Soviets fought with skill and determination. As 5th Company tried to turn the enemy's left flank about 2,000 meters north of the Kawamata Bridge, heavy artillery fire ripped into their ranks. Soviet tanks also appeared and began directing cannon and machine gun fire at the Japanese attackers. The 7th Company, on the Soviet right, supported by heavy machine guns, managed to break through two lines of the Soviets' outer defenses, but the increasing crescendo of artillery and tank fire took a heavy toll on the attacking force.

Enemy shelling continued to increase, especially fire from the Halha's higher west bank which enfiladed the 2/28th's axis of attack. So savage was the barrage that it had already stopped the Yasuoka Detachment at its morning line of departure. The 2/28th continued its leap-frog advance, finally arriving about 1,800 meters from the vital bridge but, by that time, Japanese casualties from Soviet artillery fire were heavy. Second Lieutenant Nishinome, commander of 2d Platoon, 6th Company, had been killed by machine gun fire as he led his platoon into a Soviet trench. Moreover, the men were exhausted physically by the extreme 34° C heat, which, together with the blazing sun and swirling sand and



Map 10. Japanese offensive 3—5 July 1939.

dust thrown up by artillery bursts, produced an agonizing thirst that they were unable to slake as both sides fought a punishing battle of attrition.

On 5 July the 2/28th Infantry experienced the full fury of Soviet defensive combat as discrepancies between doctrine and tactical reality became apparent. In the case of Changkufeng, Japanese infantrymen broke through a thinly held linear hilltop position to seize their objective. Now at Nomonhan there was no single line of Soviet defense. The Japanese infantryman found defenses in depth. Breaking the enemy's outer lines guaranteed no success because the Soviets fell back into prepared defensive positions covered by interlocking automatic weapons fire. Soviet artillery preregistered on the vacated position could then blast the Japanese attackers and swell their casualty list.

After the Japanese broke into the Soviet outer defense lines, enemy resistance increased as reinforcements, probably from the 149th Motorized Rifle Regiment, 36th Motorized Rifle Division, bolstered the Soviet defenders. Fifteen enemy tanks counterattacked 5th Company, but the battalion's attached 37-mm company, firing at long range, scored a lucky hit on one tank which burst into flames. A combination of extreme heat, volatile gasoline fuel, and exposed engines on the Soviet tanks accounted for significant losses of Soviet tanks in the early stages of the battle. The remaining tanks veered away but there was no respite for the Japanese infantry as Soviet artillery fired shell after shell upon them. Having regrouped out of the four 37-mm guns' range, Soviet tanks added their cannon and machine gun fire to the barrage that exacted a mounting toll of Japanese soldiers.

More serious perhaps, was the fact that the 2/28th was using its ammunition at a rate that would soon exhaust it. The battalion's normal basic load, carried by its horse transport, was five days' ammunition and supplies. For this engagement, the 2/28th had only half of its basic load because its baggage trains had been delayed four days earlier by the mud-clogged road running between Arshaan and Nomonhan and had not reached the battalion.[10] Food and potable water were also in short supply. A Soviet counterattack threatened to annihilate the overextended 2/28th forces. The battalion aide-de-camp recorded that, "Even if we could advance, it was a situation of fighting an enemy on both our flanks and to our front."[11]

In order to conserve 37-mm armor-piercing ammunition, the battalion's two 70-mm howitzers were ordered to fire on the Soviet tanks that were shelling Japanese lines, but their high explosive rounds had no effect on the armor. Seeing all this, front-line infantrymen of 5th and 7th Companies fixed bayonets partially in expectation of hand-to-hand combat and partially because sand and swirling dust had jammed many rifles and rendered one of every five light machine guns inoperable.[12]

The Soviet tanks did not make another attack but stopped about 1,400 or 1,500 meters from the Japanese positions. From partial defilade, exposing only their turrets, Soviet BT tanks continued pounding the forward Japanese positions. Coupled with the mounting volume of artillery fire, Japanese troops fell dead or wounded one after another. Contact with the 64th Infantry was lost as Soviet infantry now threatened both flanks of the battalion.

At 1200, however, Yasuoka Detachment Headquarters ordered the battalion to hold its exposed positions through the day and to prepare to move to better cover at night. Even as the order was being received, Japanese front-line infantrymen reported that Soviet tanks and infantry were attacking under a heavy rolling barrage.

The main Soviet counterattack fell on the 5th Company, which was defending the battalion's left flank. A platoon from the 6th Company reserve rushed forward to protect the 5th's exposed left flank as numerically superior enemy infantry, estimated at more than 500 men, moved to attack it. Passing among the tanks that were providing covering fire, Soviet infantrymen pressed determined attacks against the Japanese, who hurriedly entrenched themselves in the loose sand for protection against the hail of Soviet fire. Making use of depressions and other natural cover, the Soviet infantry reached the Japanese lines and only vicious close combat with bayonets, swords, and fists prevented individual Japanese squads from being overrun.

While 5th and 7th Companies struggled with Soviet infantrymen on the blistering sands, Soviet armor resumed its assault. Japanese 37-mm guns, disregarding the "approved solution" of "one round, one hit," fired their remaining armor-piercing rounds at Soviet tanks as fast as the gunners could load, fire, and reload. The concentrated fire from the four guns smashed into the Soviet armor, sending smoke and flames spewing from two tanks and damaging a third which ground to a halt. While this setback temporarily stalled the main Soviet attack, several tanks, showing skillful use of the rolling terrain to mask their movement, circled around the Japanese front and appeared on 7th Company's left flank. A close attack squad[13] from the 7th tried to get close enough to the tanks to detonate their Molotov cocktails or explosive mines against the hulls, but a Soviet machine gun crew cut down the Japanese attackers. Soviet tanks rolled toward the open flank. Just then several Japanese aircraft roared in and bombed the advancing armor. That fortuitous support stopped the attempted encirclement as Soviet tankers turned away, followed by Soviet infantrymen who began to pull back as they saw the armor turn towards the south. The 7th had held, but barely.

The 5th Company, whose ranks were already depleted by its morning attack, continued the unequal struggle against Soviet armor and infantry. Captain Aoyagi, the company commander, was killed while he directed the defense. Still more enemy reinforcements moved across the Halha River and about 100 of them, supported by tanks, tried to turn the Japanese right flank by rolling up the 6th Company platoon that was providing flank security. This new threat, the increasing disparity in troops and weapons, and crashing Soviet artillery placed the 5th in danger of being overrun.

The Japanese survivors of 5th Company had to pull back. After collecting their dead and wounded, 5th Company began to withdraw, covered by the battalion's 37-mm guns firing high explosive shells and its heavy machine guns. At 1940 hours, without any determined, aggressive hostile pursuit, 6th and 7th Companies also pulled back to reorganize and consolidate at a night defensive position about 300 meters north of Hill 731. The battalion was back to its 3 July start line.

Around 2330 on 5 July rain began to fall. The Japanese troops collected rainwater in helmets, canteens, canvas tenting, or anything else available. In the chill night air their soaked clothing added to their general discomfort from a shortage of rations and the galling failure of their attack. Occasional Soviet flares or illumination rounds temporarily lit up the dark landscape and revealed charred tank hulks, animal carcasses, and bloated human corpses covered with swarming flies. Major Kajikawa spoke to the assembled troops at 0130 on 6 July and emphasized that the disengagement was a tactic to insure the accomplishment of the overall mission. He encouraged both officers and men to be confident of victory in the glorious tradition of the 28th Infantry.

These morale-building "pep talks" were expected from Japanese field commanders. A good officer, to Japanese thinking, made a good unit. Men fought well because officers led them well. An officer led twenty-four hours a day, shared the same hardships as his troops, and the soldiers expected his encouragement. A good commander, like Kajikawa, kept his men informed of the overall plan of maneuver, at least to the degree that he understood it, given the wretched state of Japanese communications equipment. If such qualities were lacking, a unit under constant stress of combat would quickly disintegrate. The unit commander was the heart that pumped life into a combat unit.[14]

The battalion, in three days of combat, had acquitted itself well against the Red Army. It estimated that 300 enemy personnel had been killed or wounded, four tanks destroyed (scouts would report two more in the morning) or damaged, two heavy and three light machine guns, plus half a dozen rifles captured. Doctrine and training were paying off and the Japanese preconception of how their Soviet foe would fight also seemed accurate.

The Soviets, for example, had employed their armor in direct support of their infantry exactly as the Japanese translation of the 1936 Soviet tactics manual said they would, small numbers of tanks dispersed at company level to advance in front of infantry who in turn covered the tanks with their firepower. Tanks also maneuvered rapidly to reduce losses. The Japanese expected the Soviet tanks to lead infantry assaults and their expectations were realized.[15] Soviet artillery fire had been heavy, but artillery was known to be the backbone of the Soviet Army.[16] The Soviet private soldier had exhibited tenacity but little individual initiative, confirming Japanese stereotypes of the stolid nature of the Russian people. Still the Japanese had suffered heavy casualties, many perhaps the direct result of deficiencies within the battalion itself.[17]

Reassessing the battle to date, battalion officers candidly acknowledged that there had been no coordination among regimental artillery and individual infantry units.[18] Moreover, the individual infantry units fought mainly isolated engagements without mutual support from adjacent friendly units. In the case of the 2/28th, once battle was joined, they quickly lost all coordination with the 64th Infantry on their left flank and thus exposed themselves to a tank attack that almost overran the battalion. The lack of modern communications equipment meant that there simply was no fast and accurate way for Kajikawa's troops to commun-

icate with Lieutenant General Yasuoka's forces. Battalion runners, while daring under fire, could not be depended on to coordinate maneuvers in the timely fashion demanded by a fluid battle.

If command and control procedures proved ineffectual for modern combined arms warfare, so too did the Japanese Army's logistics system. Half the 2/28th's basic load had been mired in the muddy roads leading to Nomonhan. Division resupply was also unable to keep pace with regimental artillery's unexpectedly heavy consumption of shells.[19] Troops also suffered the physical discomfort of hunger because rations failed to reach them and dysentery from drinking brackish water because that was all that was available. Finally, there was the gnawing fear that they would soon exhaust their ammunition.

Tactically the Soviet artillery positioned on the high ground of the Halha's west bank loomed ever more important because as soon as the Japanese exposed a firing position it was subjected to retaliatory artillery fire. Nevertheless, the 23d Division headquarters ordered renewed offensive operations the following day, 6 July.

Three factors probably influenced the decision to continue the offensive. First, lower echelon intelligence was inadequate and did not permit an accurate divisional staff assessment of battlefield conditions. Second, the Kwantung Army Headquarters' operations officers like MAJ Tsuji Masanobu or Lieutenant Colonel Hattori were pressing for an offensive and the Kwantung Army Intelligence Section had almost no voice in planning compared to the Operations Section.[20] Third, the Japanese believed that the Soviets would be unable to sustain the volume of firepower, particularly artillery, that characterized the initial fighting.

At dawn on 6 July the battalion again pushed southward from Hill 731 towards the Kawamata Bridge. The 7th Company remained in reserve with the 37-mm guns while the 6th Company led the advance flanked by 5th Company survivors. Accurate enemy artillery fire quickly engaged the Japanese. The Japanese thought that the Soviet gunners had simply guessed right, but then they saw the Soviet aircraft buzzing overhead, apparently spotting for the artillery. The contrast between the Japanese infantryman and the Soviet airman symbolized the fundamental difference between the opposing forces. The Japanese relied on men to accomplish a mission, the Soviets also relied on men but added machines to help the men accomplish a mission.

After advancing about 1,000 meters, the point squad discovered that Soviet troops were fortifying new positions about 2,000 meters to their front. Field telephone wire had been strung from the reserve position as the units advanced so that this day the 2/28th could coordinate its limited organic artillery support and its heavy machine gun company's firepower to disrupt the enemy's work. The improved Soviet defenses, however, made further advance impossible, indeed it had been difficult to advance the initial 1,000 meters.[21]

The battalion spent the remainder of the day along the ridgeline from which it had discovered the enemy troops. Soviet tanks seemed to be attempting to turn the battalion's flanks, but, lacking contact with the 64th Reg-

iment, no one knew for sure. Soviet artillery backed by tank cannon fire continued to hammer the battalion line. At dusk the two advance companies dug in for the night.

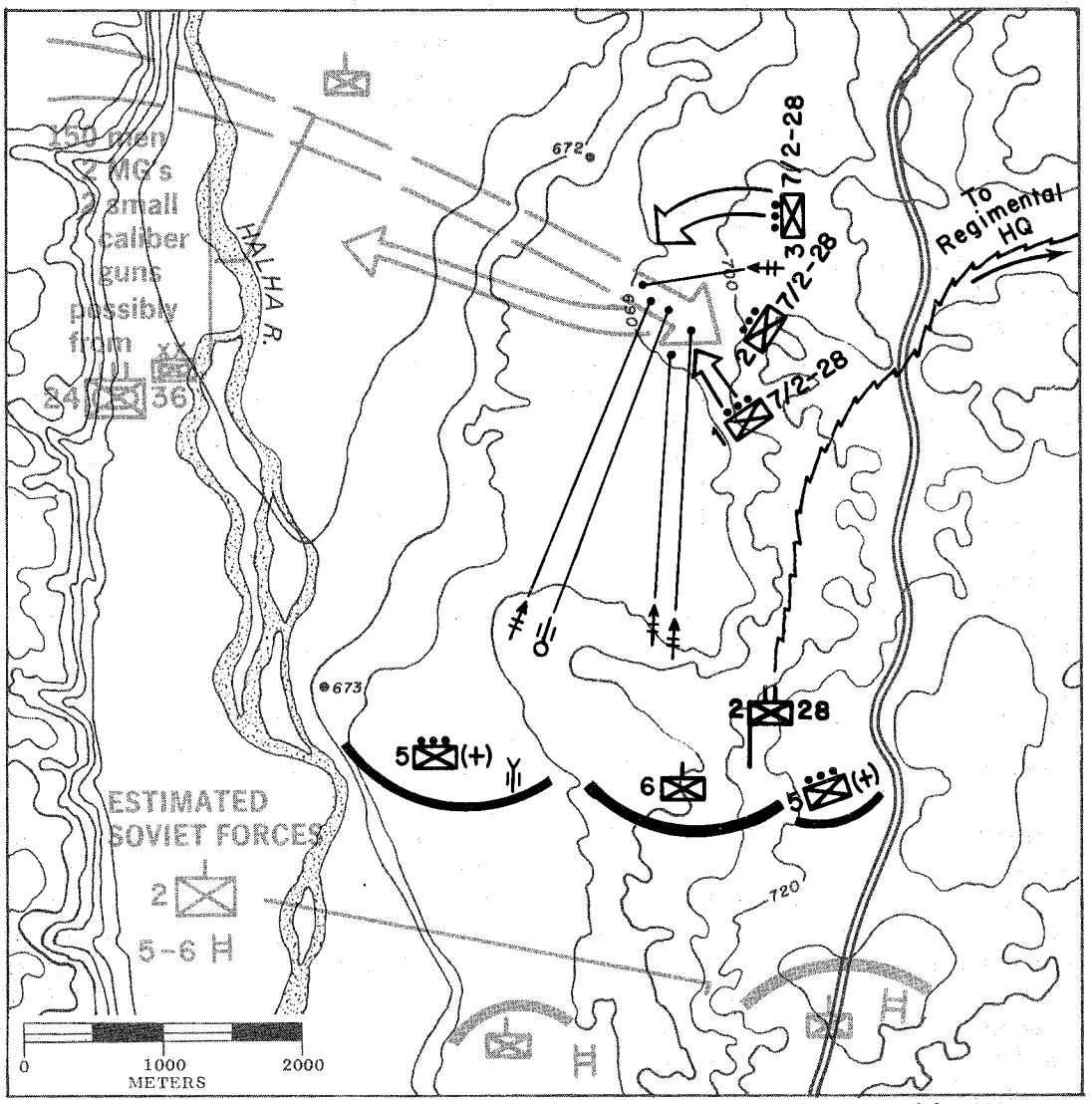
The next day, 7 July, the Kajikawa unit continued to prepare for another attack on the Soviets. During the hot, humid afternoon, outposts reported that about 150 enemy troops with two machine guns and two artillery pieces were trying to infiltrate battalion lines after fording the Halha. First Lieutenant Saito, 7th Company commander, reacted quickly by swinging his 1st and 2d Platoons around to meet this attack upon his rear. The 3d Platoon was held in reserve to act as a covering force. (See Map 11.)

His troops skillfully concealed from the approaching enemy, Saito used a field telephone to coordinate the shift of heavy machine guns and battalion artillery to the north and then called in their fire on the infiltrators' right flank. Stunned by the sudden burst of fire, which destroyed one watercooled machine gun, the Soviets scattered for cover. In the meantime 1st Platoon, led by Sergeant Nakaharu, maneuvered closer to the enemy troops who were still pinned down under heavy Japanese fire. As Saito lifted the covering fire, 1st Platoon charged into the still disorganized enemy and bayoneted or shot to death those Soviets who stood and fought and routed the remainder. The 3d Platoon Commander, Second Lieutenant Suzuki, was killed by sniper fire as he led his men trying to cut off the enemy's escape route. The company gained a measure of revenge when its grenade discharger squad, under Sergeant Iwaki, bombarded the fleeing enemy troops, making the Soviet debacle complete. Altogether 102 enemy bodies littered the sand, and the Japanese collected twenty rifles, two machine guns, and two artillery pieces.

The battalion remained on alert the rest of the day and watched enemy vehicle traffic on the Halha's west bank. Soviet artillery fire gradually increased as the day wore on and Japanese scouts reported that the enemy seemed very busy repairing wire entanglements around his lines. Furthermore, reinforcements seemed to be strengthening Soviet forces. Heavy rain began to fall. Following the unsuccessful Soviet infiltration attempt, Japanese patrols scouted near the Halha and reported that its rising level would make it difficult for troops to ford but not for tanks. An outpost was left around Hill 673 to watch for any more attempted Soviet crossings.

About one-half hour before the discovery of the enemy infiltrators, Major Kajikawa had issued orders to prepare for a twilight attack, the objective of which would be to seize and to hold the banks of the confluence of the two rivers. According to an enemy prisoner taken that afternoon, the Soviets were planning an attack of their own to take the Kajikawa lines. When Kajikawa learned of the impending Soviet attack, he accordingly amended his original orders at 2000 to cancel the attack and instead ordered the troops to use the remaining twilight to complete night defensive trenches and foxholes.[22]

The night passed uneventfully, although the cold rain made the troops miserable. The battalion stayed on alert into mid-morning of 8 July. Then, at 1000, Lieutenant General Yasuoka, by field telephone, told Major Kajikawa that the enemy was retreating across the Kawamata Bridge and ordered the



Map 11. 7th Company, 2/28th Infantry's destruction of attempted Soviet infiltration 7 July 1939.

battalion to pursue vigorously to cut off the enemy retreat. First Lieutenant Sawada, 5th Company Weapons Platoon Commander, led the advance with one platoon and 6th Company. Two heavy machine gun crews, two 37-mm and two 70-mm guns provided the muscle for the pursuit operation.

At 1100 Sawada began his advance but soon discovered that contrary to the general's information, the enemy was not retreating but clearly was receiving strong reinforcements. Sawada's reports only confirmed Kajikawa's personal observation of the advance. Receiving heavy enemy artillery fire, Sawada halted his men after advancing about 2,000 meters, occupying Hinomaru Heights, and scattering an enemy outpost perched there.[23] The battalion estimated enemy strength to be 300 infantrymen, five tanks, and a dozen artillery guns, probably of the machine gun battalion and the 149th Rifle Regiment whom the Japanese had been fighting for the past week.

Night Attack I and Soviet Retaliation:

Sheltering in hastily excavated foxholes, behind sand dunes, and in folds in the ground, Sawada's men endured an afternoon of Soviet artillery fire. Sawada himself saw an advantage to his exposed position because it was close enough to the enemy to strike in a night raid. He informed Kajikawa by runner of his intentions. Apprised of these plans, the battalion commander in turn decided to launch a battalion-size night attack to chop off the enemy flank.

Once again, however, the dynamics of the battle forced a hurried improvisation. Around 2230, Sawada's outposts reported about two companies of enemy infantry moving through the darkness to attack Hinomaru Heights. Sawada's troops, already on line and prepared for their own night attack, quickly adapted to meet the enemy probe. Sawada positioned his 5th Company platoon and heavy machine guns along Hinomaru crest and moved the 6th Company around and down to the east slope of the hill to enfilade the advancing enemy soldiers.

Starting up the slope, the Soviets opened covering fire with their heavy and light machine guns and popped flares to guide their assault troops. The Japanese gunners promptly returned an even heavier fire that cut a swath through the startled attackers, who thought they had achieved tactical surprise. With the Soviet attack momentarily stalled, First Lieutenant Sawada led 6th Company's charge into the exposed right flank of the enemy attackers, and sent them reeling in disorder.

Sawada pursued the fleeing enemy troops into their own lines. This sort of night fighting was the soul of the IJA and the Japanese chased the Soviets with a vengeance. Although a subsequent IJA study on small unit tactics praised the operation for its bold improvisation and daring offensive spirit, the night attack itself more closely resembled a confused brawl in the dark, punctuated by staccato machine gun bursts and illuminated by Soviet flares, tracers, and star clusters.

The 2/28th Infantry's troops, many of whom were beginning their second full year of intensive night combat training, were still not able to exploit effectively the opportunity the ill-fated Soviet attack provided them.[24] Their

difficulties were characteristic of what all Japanese infantrymen at Nomonhan encountered or indeed of the peculiar hazards of night combat. Maintaining their sense of direction in a landscape with few easily recognizable terrain features became an exhausting and nerve-racking business. The 6th Company was fairly disorganized by the time it reached the Soviets' outposts. Infantrymen bunched up to maintain contact, but this made them vulnerable to enemy hand grenades. Fortunately for the Japanese attackers, most of the Soviet small-arms fire passed harmlessly over their heads, but a high proportion of the raiders suffered grenade fragment wounds.[25]

After action debriefings revealed that when a few wildly thrown Soviet grenades landed anywhere near Japanese troops, they would stop advancing and bunch up for a false sense of protection. Enemy rifle fire, though most sailed high, had a similar effect. There were few Japanese soldiers like the courageous Platoon Sergeant Iwakoshi who personally accounted for twelve enemy soldiers with his bayonet before another intended victim shot him in the chest. Sawada had to regroup and to redirect his troops constantly. It required close personal and continual leadership.

In the blackness, enemy foxholes and communications trenches obstructed any attempt at coordinated troop movement. Hastily organized squad formations broke down within the Soviet fortifications as some troops sprained ankles or broke limbs after unexpected falls into enemy trenches. Moreover, after the initial attack, that is, the seizure of the first Soviet line, no clear objective existed for the troops.

After the battle, Japanese army psychologists isolated four elements of combat that most affected the morale of attacking shock troops: the distance to the objective, the clarity of it in troops' minds, any sudden change in the objective, and unexpected losses when taking the objective.[26] In the case of the 6th Company's action, after the ambush of the attacking Soviet troops their objective suddenly changed, but it was not completely clear what they were to do when they reached the Soviet lines. The Japanese also lost about one-third of their attacking force, a high price in any engagement. These combined factors sobered 6th Company ranks about the success of the raid, in which an estimated 150 Soviets were killed.

From the Kajikawa perimeter, Sawada's attack seemed to touch off a fireworks display in the Soviet lines. Soviet machine gun crews fired tracer rounds into the night and other enemy defenders shot dozens of illumination rounds and flare after flare. Shaking off their fascination with the multicolored explosions and glaring light of flares, the remainder of the Kajikawa Battalion moved forward to protect Sawada's right flank. About 0300 on 9 July, Sawada's exhausted raiders returned to Hinomaru Heights. They carried most of their thirty dead and wounded.

Survivors of 6th Company, less than two platoons, and a depleted platoon of 5th Company supported by battalion artillery and heavy machine guns dug in to defend Hinomaru Heights. Meanwhile, Major Kajikawa had used the distraction caused by Sawada's raid into the Soviet lines and the cover of darkness to move this 7th Company and a 5th Company platoon

about 750 meters south to form a flank to defend Hinomaru Heights.

Apparently stung by their losses of the previous night, the Soviets launched a major counterattack against the battalion on 9 July. About 300 enemy infantrymen, supported by five tanks, advanced against the Japanese lines under a rolling artillery barrage. They reached the base of Hinomaru Heights and brought up heavy machine guns to cover riflemen who were digging in there. As these frontline skirmishers finished their foxholes, the tanks, each accompanied by five or six infantrymen, including a couple of sharpshooters, laid down protective fire as the rest of the infantry dug foxholes.[27] Only 7th Company managed to keep the Soviet attackers on their right flank at bay about 700 meters from the company's front lines.

At Hinomaru Heights, however, after completing their temporary rifle and machine gun pits, half of the Soviet infantrymen began to advance up the slope line in short dashes while the remaining riflemen, machine gunners, and tanks provided covering fire. About thirty meters away the enemy hurled grenades but otherwise showed little stomach for hand-to-hand combat. Lurking in depressions or behind some shrubs, snipers also peppered the Japanese ridgeline picking off careless soldiers. The Japanese drove the Soviets from cover with hand grenades or the more deadly grenade dischargers and then back down the hill. But the enemy troops regrouped and attacked again. The Soviet troops probably hoped to take advantage of the weakened condition of their opponents and thus repeatedly stormed the hill. To insure that there were no Soviet slackers, GPU* agents oversaw the performance of the Soviet infantrymen and promptly shot any soldier who did not unquestioningly obey any order.[28] By nightfall, about 100 Soviet dead dotted the slope and two charred tank hulks were near the bottom of the hill. But the Japanese defenders on Hinomaru Heights were equally exhausted having been barely able to hold off the repeated Soviet attacks.

Redeployment

Earlier that day, Major Kajikawa received word informing him that the Yasuoka Task Force was being dissolved and henceforth Kajikawa would operate under the orders of COL Sumi Shinichiro, Commander, 26th Infantry, 7th Division,[29] whose unit replaced the battered Yasuoka force on the 2/28th Infantry's left flank. As ordered, 6th Company scouts linked up with the Machine Gun Company of the 1st/26th Infantry that afternoon.

The defeat of the Yasuoka Detachment, of which the 2/28th was a part, affected Japanese operational planning for the remainder of the battle. But perhaps its influence in Lieutenant General Komatsubara's case was even more malignant. As he surveyed the battlefield he saw only corpses and dead horses littering it. Shells were falling and hissing overhead and a pall of black smoke hung over everything. It reminded Komatsubara of an oil painting of the Battle of Moscow he had once seen in a museum and he confided in his diary, "The battlefield is a place of misery."[30] His mood, although hardly one expected from a general officer,

**The GPU or Main Political Directorate was the Red Army's offshoot of the KGB, the Committee of State Security.*

matched the new atmosphere among the Japanese private soldiers. After early July, Japanese troops no longer looked forward to combat with the Soviets. They would fight hard and well as ordered, but their previous optimism and confidence, like the tanks of the Yasuoka Detachment, lay smashed and broken on the desert dunes.[31]

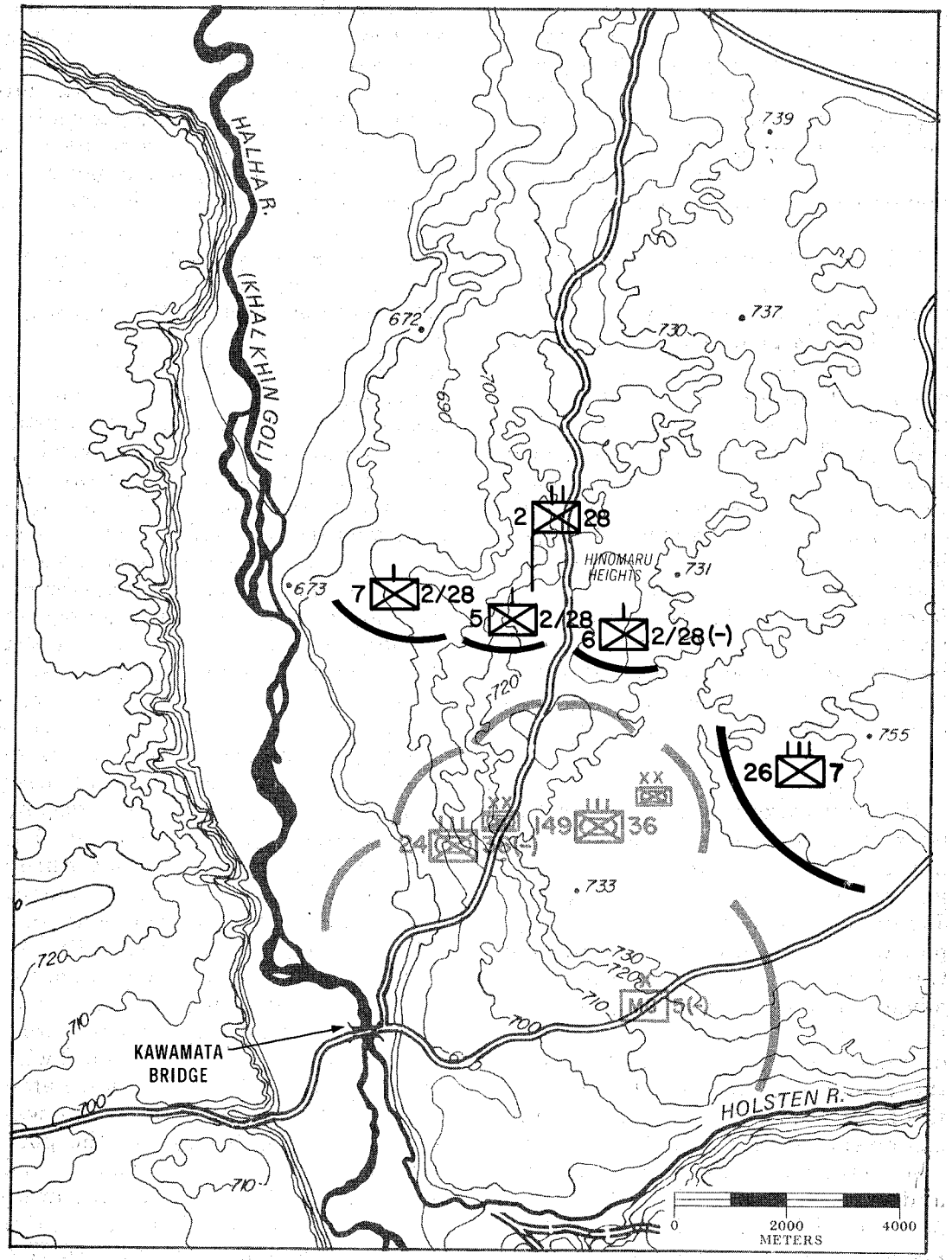
All through the hot dusty day of 10 July, Soviet artillery bombarded 2/28th Infantry lines. The 6th Company, holding precariously to Hinomaru Heights, managed to beat back several Soviet infantry probing attacks by using machine gun, 37-mm, and 70-mm fire. The Soviet position resembled a salient jutting out from Kawamata Bridge into the battalion's lines. With Japanese units on the sides of the salient, the Soviet seizure of Hinomaru Heights would split the Japanese forces in two and pin the 2/28th Infantry to the Halha's bank. The Japanese had to hold to Hinomaru Heights against superior Soviet forces or withdraw. (See Map 12.)

In order to redress his lines for better mutual fire support, Kajikawa ordered a night attack for 10 July against Soviet troops remaining near Japanese lines. Coordinating fire support with 1st/26th Infantry's Machine Gun Company, Kajikawa ordered an advance to a line 2,000 meters north of the Kawamata Bridge. Covered by darkness and a smokescreen because of the moonlight, the battalion's right flank (7th Company) advanced and met no enemy resistance. The company also managed to get reinforcements and ammunition to the beleaguered forces on Hinomaru Heights. It took about two hours to cover the 700 meters.

By dawn on 11 July, the reorganized battalion positions had 6th Company with 37-mm and heavy machine gun crews on the right flank, 7th Company with 37-mm guns on the left, and a platoon of 5th Company providing left flank security. The remainder of 5th Company was about 200 meters to the rear with battalion headquarters.

As Soviet troops began to improve their machine gun nests and entrench in front of the Japanese, the battalion's heavy machine guns and artillery opened fire, destroyed one Soviet machine gun, and scattered the enemy troops. Almost immediately Soviet artillery shells began crashing into the battalion positions but the battalion's 70-mm howitzers replied with effective counterbattery fire and the Soviet shelling soon stopped. Throughout the day, Soviet tanks and infantry remained active in front of the battalion and Soviet artillery fired occasional volleys to let the Japanese know they were still there.

Both sides worked that night to strengthen their lines. The Japanese covered their foxholes with canvas and vegetation served as camouflage. The next morning, 12 July, beginning around 0900, Soviet artillery slammed into Japanese lines for one hour. Battalion artillery again returned fire, although its volume could not match the Soviets. Battalion machine gun crews fired on Soviet artillery weapons, probably 45-mm guns, located forward with Soviet infantry. Firing died down after 1000 and the remainder of the day was spent repairing damage to the positions caused by enemy shelling and reorganizing the defense. That afternoon, 2d Platoon, 5th Company, under Second Lieutenant Sano, scouted Halha River fords near Hill 673. They saw



Map 12. 2/28th Infantry's situation 10 July 1939.

no sign of enemy activity but did report that the 1.33-meter high water level made it very difficult for infantry to cross the river and that tanks also would have problems. During the night of 12—13 July, the battalion adjusted its lines slightly, mainly to avoid being zeroed in by enemy gunners.

Once again at 0900 artillery began a brisk pounding of Japanese lines. When the barrage lifted, riflemen on opposing crests exchanged shots at long range. The distance between the lines varied from 450 to 1,000 meters and riflemen were probably conducting a reconnaissance by fire to discover whether or not the opposing forces had pulled back under cover of the barrage.

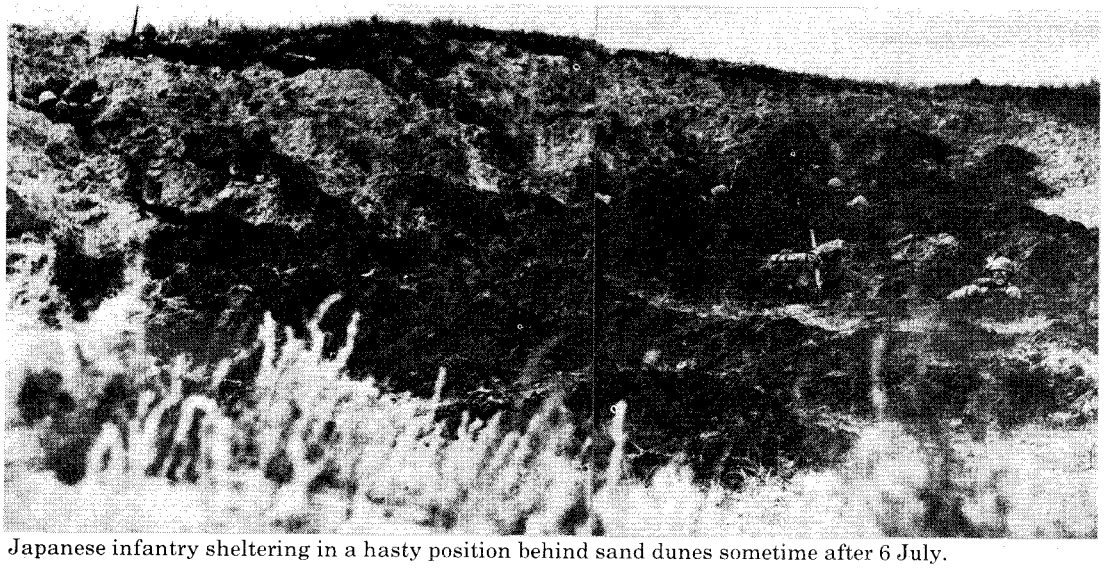
Major Kajikawa met with Colonel Sumi at noon and was ordered to shift his positions northeast to near Hill 731, in effect, to pull back from Hinomaru Heights. Lieutenant General Komatsubara decided on the withdrawal following the heavy fighting of the night of 11 July and early morning of 12 July. The 64th Infantry lost 77 killed, 29 missing, and 160 wounded and, according to Komatsubara, its offensive spirit. On 12 July, the general's diary entry noted, "The battlefield situation does not permit optimism."[32]

Heavy rain in the afternoon helped to obscure the battalion's preparations for its move. At dusk the battalion opened fire on the enemy lines, but no return fire was received. Taking advantage of this lull, the battalion disengaged from its hard won and stubbornly held positions around Hinomaru Heights and moved at night to an intermediary position. Enemy artillery on 14 July made any movement difficult during daylight hours, so the battalion waited behind sand dunes and in depressions for nightfall to mask their movements.

Then a battalion runner returning from regimental headquarters reported that Colonel Sumi planned a night attack against the Kawamata Bridge because the Japanese believed that the Soviets were retreating to the Halha's right bank and only small rear guard units remained. This belief probably stemmed from an incident on 12 July. The Soviet 603d Rifle Regiment, 82d Rifle Division, moved to the Halha's eastern bank on that day. The regiment was activated in early July, so this was the regiment's first combat experience. Under heavy Japanese artillery fire, the men panicked, but the regimental commander and political commissar were able to restore a semblance of order. That night the 603d went into reserve on the Halha's western side where it received more thorough combat training.

Sumi hoped to take advantage of that disorder to advance to the Halha and to destroy the Soviet troops still on the east bank. The Kajikawa unit would serve as a reserve force for the 26th Infantry, retrace its steps to Hinomaru Heights, and occupy it.[33] The move back was difficult and by dawn the battalion still had not reached its objective. Major Kajikawa sent scouts to reconnoiter Hinomaru Heights, but they failed to return.[34]

With the scouts long overdue and the sun rising, Kajikawa ordered his battalion to move towards Hinomaru Heights. About one hour later, a forward security guard squad met retreating units of the Sumi Regiment. Informed that contrary to previous reports the Soviets were not retreating but were digging in, Komatsubara, in



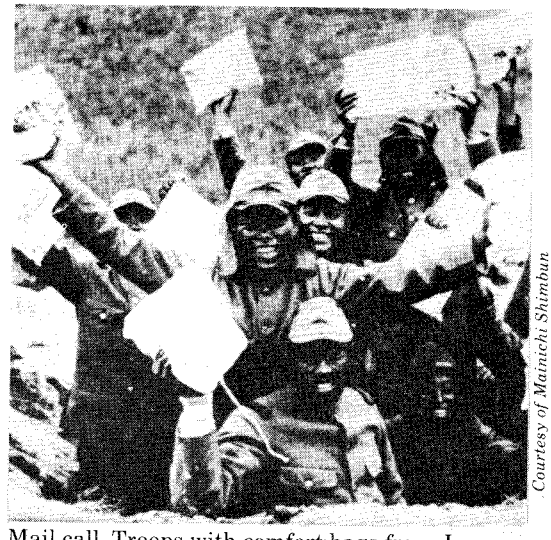
Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

Japanese infantry sheltering in a hasty position behind sand dunes sometime after 6 July.

consultation with Kwantung Army Headquarters staff officers, decided to call off the attack. He would build up his heavy artillery forces before resuming the offensive. Colonel Sumi was withdrawing to shorten his lines and to resupply his troops for the subsequent offensive. Kajikawa realized the acute danger that a Soviet counterattack might isolate his unit on Hinomaru Heights, and so he requested and received a change of orders.[35]

That night the battalion spread out behind sand dunes between Hill 731 and Hinomaru Heights to avoid enemy observation and fire. On 15 July the battalion conducted a dawn reconnaissance and by early afternoon laagered behind sand dunes northeast of Hinomaru Heights.

They remained there on 16 July when a resupply column brought Lieutenant General Komatsubara's orders for the battalion to go into reserve. The respite was welcome, but the battle-worn, weary, and disheveled infantrymen were more interested in "comfort bags" prepared by the Japan Society of Hailaerh. The bags, containing sundries like soap, hand towels, toilet paper, toothbrushes, sugar cubes, and chocolate, were distributed one per five men. The truly lucky soldier was the one who opened the bag to discover that his favorite cabaret hostess had packed it complete with pin-ups and rather suggestive letters.[36]



Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

Mail call. Troops with comfort bags from Japanese civilians.

During the night of 17 July, the battalion moved to its new positions on Hill 731, completing the move in the early morning hours of 18 July. The next two days were spent fortifying the hill and dodging the incessant Soviet artillery fire. Division then ordered the 2/28th Infantry to act as a reserve for the impending Japanese offensive so it moved again. On the morning of 20 July, the 2/28th arrived at 23d Division headquarters tired and wet after marching most of the night in a driving rainstorm. The battalion remained in reserve from 20 through 27 July, during the entire IJA offensive which commenced on 23 July.

4

Stalemate and Attrition

Hills 742 and 754

The 64th and 72d Infantry regiments spearheaded the Japanese frontal assault on the Kawamata Bridge defenses that began on 23 July. In support of the operation, additional artillery units from Japan and from the artillery training school at Hailaerh were mobilized in an attempt to overwhelm the Soviets by a massive artillery barrage. Japanese guns fired 15,000 rounds at the Soviets on 23 July, but the Soviets responded with an even heavier counterbarrage and counterbattery fire.[1] From 23 July through 25 July, Japanese field artillery guns consumed half their doubled ten-day load and their inability to replenish ammunition stocks was a main reason for calling off the general offensive on 25 July.[2]

Lieutenant General Komatsubara ordered his forces to entrench after they failed to drive the Soviets from the Halha's eastern bank. He planned first to repulse an anticipated Soviet attack against the Japanese lines and second to counterattack and destroy the demoralized enemy. The 72d and 64th Infantry Regiments dug in on a line from

Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

The 72d Infantry Regiment preparing artillery firing positions on lip of crater in August 1939.

about two kilometers north of Hill 733 south of the Holsten River. This terrain overlooked the Halha River's eastern bank north of the Holsten and allowed the Japanese to observe Soviet troops in that area.

In order to protect the exposed southern flank of the 72d and 64th Regiments, Komatsubara also ordered COL Nagano Eizo's 71st Infantry Regiment to occupy the high ground of Noro Heights which dominated the area south of the Holsten. Komatsubara then decided that additional Japanese troops should fortify the commanding terrain south of Noro Heights, particularly Hills 754 and 742.

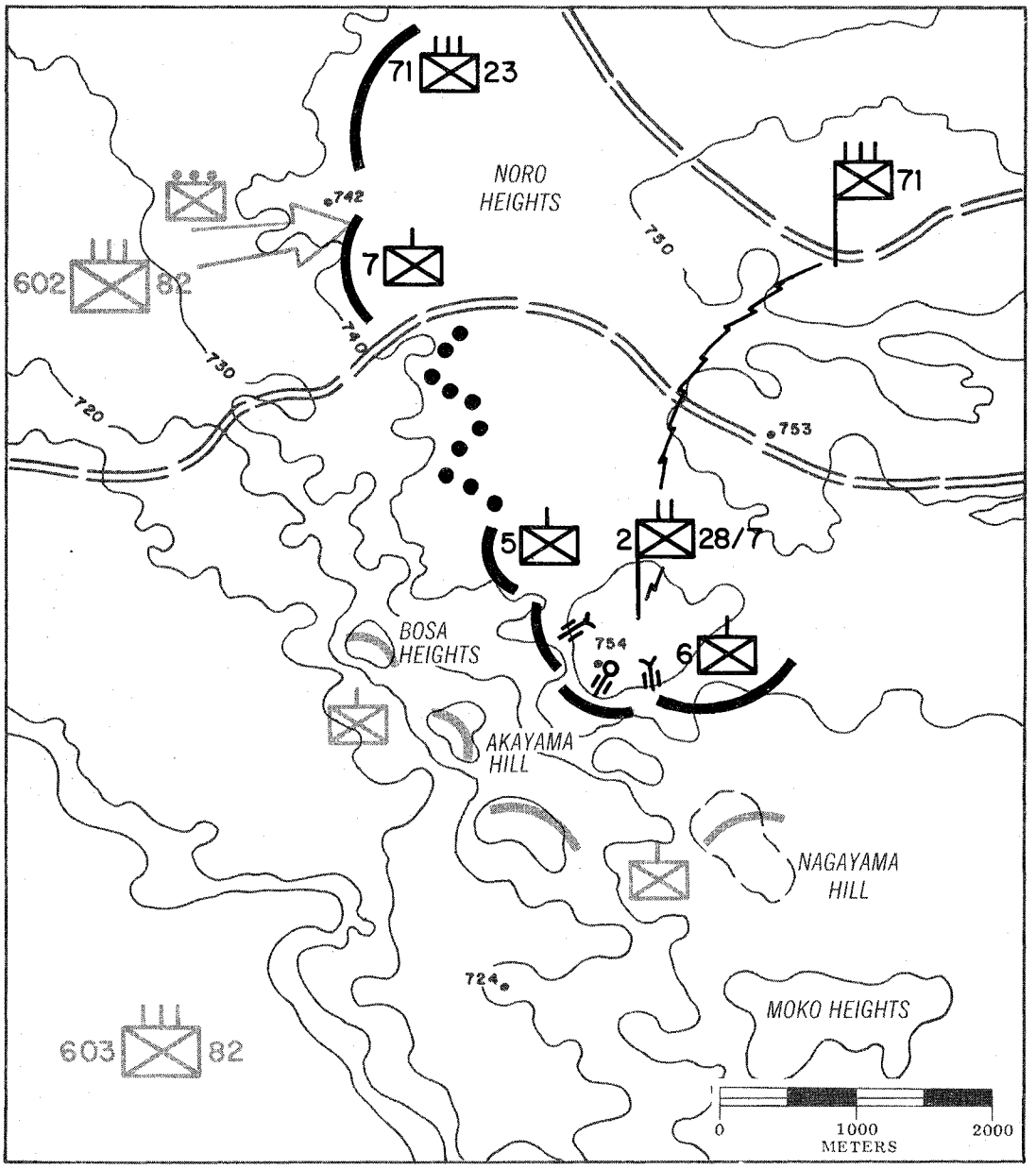
Following the unsuccessful IJA offensive, 23d Division Headquarters, in turn, ordered the Kajikawa unit, with forty new replacements assigned to the battered 5th Company, to reinforce the left flank of the Nagano Detachment (71st Infantry, 1st Battalion, 13th Field Artillery Regiment) defending Noro Heights and the key terrain around Hill 742. On 28 July the battalion moved by truck from Irigin via Nomonhan and on the Honmatsu Road to within 2,500 meters of their objective. Dismounting from the trucks on the hot, shimmering sand, the battalion took positions on the east or reverse slope of the heights for protection.

Scouts reconnoitered enemy dispositions and the new terrain that the battalion would have to defend. They also established contact with the Nagano Detachment. After the scouts reported to Major Kajikawa that Colonel Nagano wanted the battalion to relocate, battalion officers moved the men forward to a departure line closer to their new positions. Kajikawa decided to wait until twilight for the final approach and around dusk the battalion rushed forward en masse to its new lines. This tactic was used to mislead the enemy about battalion strength and to reduce Japanese losses from enemy artillery fire. Scattered artillery shells did fall among the running troops, but there were no casualties. They reached the position and quickly established a battalion command post and perimeter defense. Three hours later, in the total darkness, three supply trucks arrived carrying the battalion's food, water, and standard ammunition loads.

About this time the Soviet infantrymen, probably from the newly organized (June 1939) 82d Rifle Division, attacked the right flank of the Nagano Detachment and Kajikawa's troops could hear clearly the reports of friendly and enemy rifle fire. The 7th Company near Hill 742 actually helped to repel the assault. The 5th and 6th Companies, meanwhile, estimated that about 200 enemy troops were very active just 250 meters from their perimeter around Hill 754, about 2,000 meters south of 742. These Soviet troops probably were also members of the 82d Division. (See Map 13.)

The rest of the night, however, passed without incident. Signal squad members laid field phone wire within the defensive arc of the 5th and 6th Companies and between battalion headquarters and the Nagano Detachment Headquarters. The Japanese estimated that they faced perhaps 300 enemy infantrymen supported by four heavy machine guns, two tanks, and four field guns plus two howitzers.

After daybreak on 29 July, the battalion reorganized and reinforced its new lines. An enemy light machine gun peppered the ridgeline around Hill



Map 13. 2/28th Infantry redeployment south of the Holsten River 28 July 1939.

754 and artillery batteries exchanged fire as each side felt the other out. The next day, 30 July, was hot and humid, but the build-up continued. Troops worked and cursed as they scavenged for scrap lumber or wood to reinforce their loose-sand foxholes and trenches. Soviet artillery bombarded the 5th and 6th Companies for about an hour during the day and at dusk Second Lieutenant Takashima's 2d Platoon of 7th Company atop Hill 742 was also struck by enemy artillery. Japanese casualties were described as light.

Hill 742 was the linchpin of the Japanese defenses south of the Holsten River. Both Major Kajikawa and Colonel Nagano recognized that this key terrain had to be defended at all costs. Even if strongly fortified, however, the frontage that the 2/28th Infantry Battalion had to cover was more than 4,000 meters, approximately twice that prescribed by the manual. Dangerous gaps, which Soviet infiltrators or attackers could use to isolate the Japanese, detracted from the overall Japanese defense. The three companies, whose ranks were already depleted from battle casualties, would be stretched beyond the breaking point to cover all the openings. Rather than fragment their forces, Kajikawa and Lieutenant Colonel Azuma, acting commander of the 71st Infantry north of Hill 742, agreed to share in the defense of the critical key terrain, one company per battalion occupying Hill 742. During daylight hours, the Japanese would use their firepower to cover gaps between positions and at night small patrols would cover them. This solution was an expedient as the battalion chronicler acknowledged, "We are short of the troops required to carry out this mission as thoroughly as we would like."[3]

The first day of August dawned clear and hot. The troops sweated as they dug entrenchments in the dazzling sun. Dugouts to the depth of the average man were prepared with walls shored up by empty ammunition boxes and roofs made of boards from the boxes. Later in the day, strong northwesterly winds began to blow, marking the transition to autumn.[4] The troops took some solace in their knowledge that the weather would be cooler in about two more weeks.

Japanese troops sweeping the ground between them and the Halha to the east and then south with their binoculars could detect no change in Soviet dispositions. Scattered artillery fire was exchanged during the day but no major flare-ups of fighting occurred. The night of 1—2 August, however, about fifty enemy riflemen silently made their way up Hill 742. While one group provided covering fire with rifle and automatic weapons, about thirty of the enemy, lobbing hand grenades ahead of them, rushed Second Lieutenant Takashima's platoon of 7th Company. Takashima's men responded with fire from their light machine guns, grenade dischargers, and hand grenades to keep the Soviets from reaching their trenches. The Japanese defenders drove off the attacking Soviets, killed thirty enemy soldiers, and described their casualties as "insignificant," introducing a euphemism that they would repeat many, many times in the next few weeks.

The Soviets also realized that Hill 742 was the key to the Japanese defenses. The next day, 2 August, enemy infantry probes kept the Takashima Platoon alert. Second Lieutenant Takashima called in battalion 70-mm artillery fire to silence the irritating, and

sometimes fatal, Soviet small arms and light machine gun fire, but the Soviets replied with a fierce counterbarrage. Japanese losses were again described as "insignificant."[5]

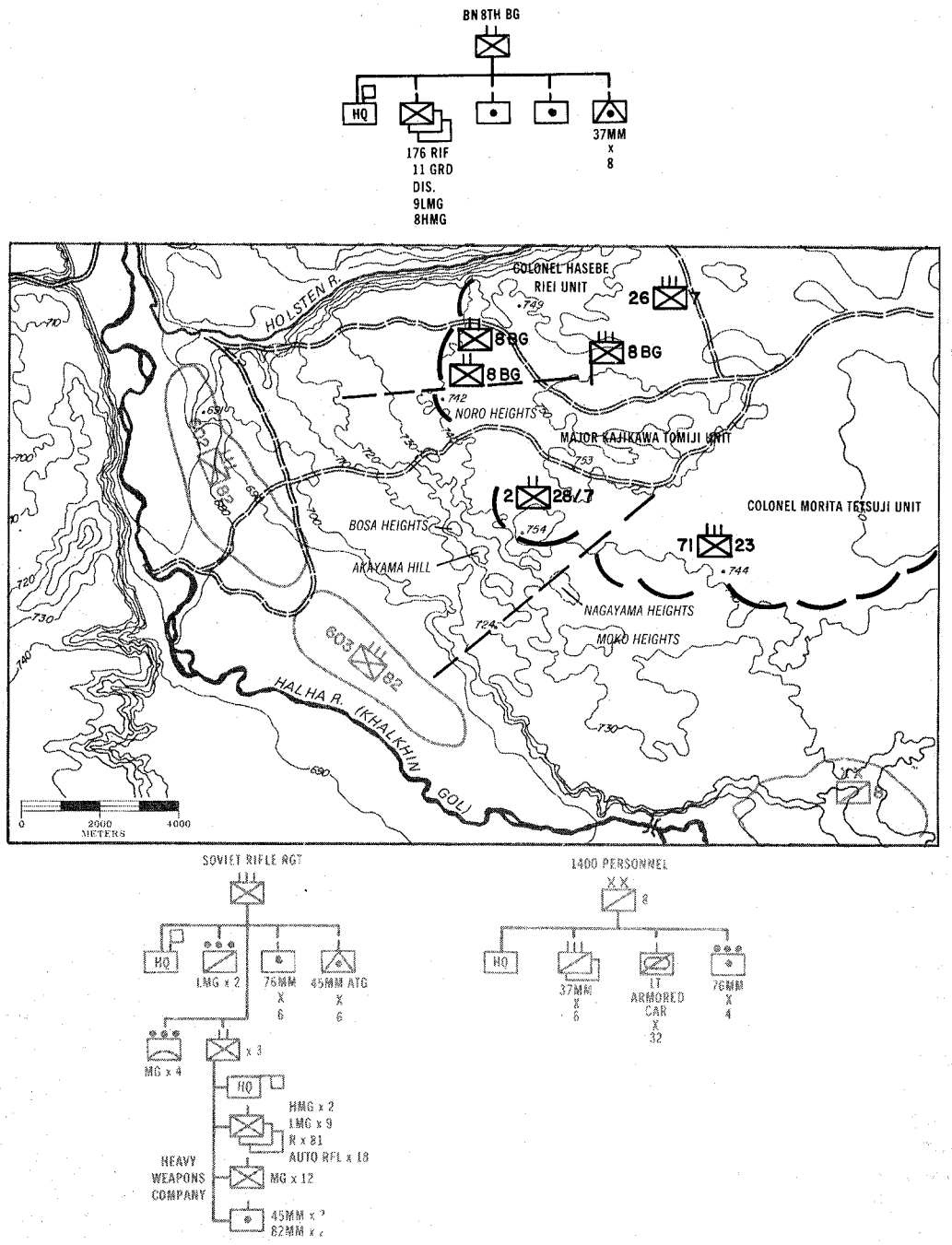
A deadly routine for the Japanese began to appear. Each day the Soviets were firing nearly 2,000 rounds of artillery, a standard of consumption undreamed of by the Japanese.[6] However, by early August the enemy began using iron shells, probably because his promiscuous use of artillery fire had surpassed the bounds of Soviet productive capability.[7] Instead of matching that Soviet profligacy, Japanese artillery commanders appealed to regimental and battalion commanders to be frugal with scarce ammunition. Yet the frontline infantry officers told Kwantung Army commander General Ueda during his 29 July frontline tour that what they most wanted was a vast increase in artillery weapons and shells.[8] More significantly, the Soviets were forcing the Japanese to fight a protracted battle of attrition that the Japanese could not win. As long as the Japanese infantrymen were digging static defense lines and not following their offensive doctrine the Soviets were winning the battle at Nomonhan.

Over the next two days, 3—4 August, the 2/28th Infantry consolidated its defensive positions and dug communications trenches between 5th and 6th Companies' position and Hill 742. On 4 August enemy infiltrators again probed Hill 742, but the Takashima Platoon used grenade dischargers to cover dead spaces and drove off the attack. That same day the battalion received orders placing it under the operational command of the Hasebe Unit whose defensive sector stretched from Hill 742 north to the Holsten. (See Map 14.) Members of the battalion signals squad laid wire from battalion headquarters on Hill 754 to Hasebe's headquarters northeast of Hill 742. Also that afternoon Japanese field sanitation details cremated their dead in funeral pyres whose smoke darkened the sky and whose stench stuck in men's nostrils.

Meanwhile, the Soviets were also busy digging in for extended combat operations. On 5 August they began fortifying Moko Heights, about 1,200 meters south of the 2/28th Battalion's left flank. The battalion's 70-mm guns temporarily interrupted their labor, but the Soviets returned after dark to finish entrenching. Major Kajikawa, adjusting to this new threat, placed one platoon of 5th Company in reserve and used one platoon of 6th Company to reinforce his left flank. While the Japanese could detect no great change in the Soviet situation, the enemy was very active and it "seemed that they were up to something."[10]

Intelligence information, probably from intercepted Soviet signals, confirmed these suspicions. According to this information, the Soviets were planning a large-scale attack to commemorate the first anniversary of the Changkufeng fighting. Thus 6 August was a tense day with the Japanese "standing to" throughout the day.

The day started oddly. The shrill whine of Soviet artillery was absent. No enemy aircraft were seen in the clear skies. Japanese re-supply truck convoys operated freely during the afternoon and brought in much needed ammunition and provisions. But to the frontline troops the lull was disquieting.[11]



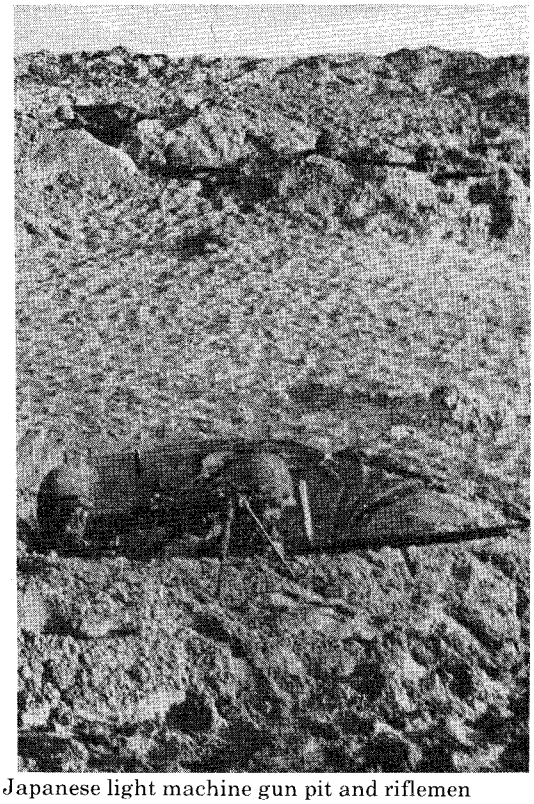
Map 14. General situation south of the Holsten River early August 1939.

Soviet Tactics

The troops' disquietude was a sound instinct because the Soviets indeed "were up to something." At 0400 on 7 August a violent Soviet artillery bombardment fell on the Hasebe unit's lines followed by a strong enemy infantry attack. Although not directly engaged in the fighting, Major Kajikawa sent his reserve platoon to reinforce his right flank on Hill 742. As Soviet illumination rounds hung over Japanese foxholes, enemy infantrymen surged forward adding their yells and screams to the general din heard by the battalion. At dawn, however, the Soviets suddenly broke off the attack.

Soviet infantrymen made several diversionary probes against the platoon of 7th Company on Hill 742 during the day. Kajikawa and his battalion aide-de-camp officer concluded that these attacks were designed to cover a major enemy attack on 5th and 6th Company lines.[12]

At 1830 on 7 August, the crescendo of a Soviet barrage exploded on the 2/28th Infantry's main lines around Hill 754. The next two hours Soviet field artillery, tank cannon, and 45-mm fire methodically pulverized the Japanese positions. For the Japanese infantryman, crouching in terror or resignation in his foxhole, it seemed endless. Direct hits obliterated machine gun positions and rifle firing pits. After the first few minutes of deadly pounding, flimsy shelters or sand foxholes not reinforced with wood shoring collapsed from near misses, in some cases suffocating their occupants under a crush of gravel and dirt. Those dazed soldiers lucky enough to scramble out from under a falling wall of sand faced the unhappy prospect of either moving under the barrage to a new shelter or scooping out a shallow cavity in the sand and hoping no Soviet shell fell close by. Accurate Soviet 45-mm guns, firing high explosive shells from about 800 meters, blew apart the canvas-covered Japanese machine gun pits and made them unusable during the subsequent enemy infantry assault. Japanese casualties would have been even higher, but about 20 percent of the Soviet shells were duds, and the sand mitigated the blast and shrapnel effects of the bursting projectiles. There were cases of Japanese troops surviving unscathed from artillery bursts a few meters away.[13]



Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

Japanese light machine gun pit and riflemen (probably early July).

At 2030 the enemy lengthened his artillery fire beyond the first-line Japanese defenses and used the extended artillery fire as a steel curtain to cordon off the front to prevent Japanese reinforcements from reaching the badly mauled first-line defenders. Then an estimated 500 Soviet infantry and five tanks advanced slowly on 5th and 6th Company lines. As a signal flare burst above Hill 754, the Soviet tanks opened a covering fire and the infantry closed to within forty meters of the Japanese lines and began throwing hand grenades.[14] The Japanese were still trying to repair their smashed trenches and this necessary labor reduced the number of men available for the firing line. Moreover, most of the light machine guns were either knocked out by the Soviet barrage or else fouled with dirt and sand the barrage had thrown up as it walked through the Japanese lines. Japanese riflemen had to shoot down exposed Soviet attackers or use their grenade dischargers to force the Soviets out from concealment. The first Soviet attack wave, really a twenty-man probe, fell back.

The main Soviet attack of about three infantry companies then began making its way up the slopes towards the Japanese lines. Again about forty meters away the Soviets began to hurl hand grenades at the Japanese defenders atop the ridgelines. Stunned literally by grenade concussion, and figuratively by the seemingly limitless abundance of Soviet hand grenades, the Japanese fought back as best they could with grenade dischargers, blasting Soviet troops regrouping in dead spaces in front of the Japanese perimeter. The enemy apparently had great respect for that weapon because the Japanese saw several Soviet infantrymen drop their weapons and flee when they heard the dreaded sound of a grenade being fired. The 5th Company's opponents showed little inclination to move any closer to the Japanese trenches and combat degenerated into a grenade-throwing contest. Such unwillingness to take the last leap to hand-to-hand combat was, as the Japanese infantryman saw it, characteristic of his Soviet counterpart.

At that moment, 6th Company's 1st Platoon would have disagreed. There Soviet infantrymen broke into the Japanese trenches and deadly close-in fighting went back and forth as the position changed hands several times. If the Soviets were driven back, more Soviet troops appeared to repulse the Japanese counterattackers. Each Soviet soldier seemed to have an assigned job, which he carried out without exhibiting any initiative even when the situation demanded it.[15] Sheer numbers and Soviet persistence exemplified by attacking the same trench again and again were wearing down the Japanese defenders. Finally, the 6th Company commander called for the battalion's 70-mm artillery guns to fire at point-blank range into the Soviet troops. That fire finally broke the Soviet attack and forced the enemy to retreat. Around 1st Platoon, 6th Company, sixty enemy bodies lay contorted in death. The enemy, however, did not panic. They conducted an orderly retreat under cover of Soviet artillery and automatic weapons fire and managed to police the battlefield as they withdrew, collecting an estimated 300 dead and wounded.

The battered defenders of 5th and 6th Companies tried to regroup and reorganize their positions. Japanese regimental artillery had been noticeable by its absence during the Soviet attack, perhaps because this was the first Jap-

anese exposure to a massive Soviet frontal assault employing combined arms tactics.[16] The battalion's survivors also knew that the Soviets were wearing down their ability to fight.

Major Kajikawa, who expected a follow-up Soviet attack, placed his entire battalion on alert. Scouts from 5th and 6th Companies crawled through the lines to reconnoiter enemy positions and attack preparations but discovered that the Soviets had pulled back about 500 meters. Apparently they feared a Japanese night counterattack, and wanted to put distance between themselves and the Japanese while they regrouped.

About the same time, a company of Soviet infantry attacked the 7th Company south of Hill 742 but was driven off with heavy losses. In retrospect, that attack may have been a diversion to cover the infiltration of an artillery fire control and observation team reinforced with riflemen for security. First Lieutenant Saito, commander of 7th Company, first detected the infiltrators and reported their move to headquarters, which sent a platoon to reinforce the company.

Position Defense

Farther south, 5th and 6th Companies pulled themselves together despite enemy sniper fire. "Between 0900 and 1600 there was sporadic enemy shelling." That simple entry in the battalion's war diary masked the horrible reality of Nomonhan. After a week of sustained combat and under repeated shelling, the Japanese were exhausted. Apathy began to set in as all that the soldiers could think of was eating white rice again and washing it down with fresh, clean water. In fact, the battalion collected rainwater in oil drums or helmets, but since their move to Noro Heights there had only been one day of rain. The troops, desperate for any water, drank from stagnant, discolored pools and got amoebic dysentery. The two battalion doctors were overwhelmed by the wounded and by the sick and only the most seriously ill could receive immediate attention. Cases of thirty or more bloody bowel movements a day might not be considered serious enough to be sent to a rear area field hospital. Even typhus cases were reported. The continual Soviet shelling left the suffering troops no choice but to defecate in their foxholes, adding to the stench of rotting carcasses and bloated corpses. Soviet artillery became so deadly the Japanese troops lived like moles and Japanese officers forbade cooking fires for fear of betraying their positions. At times, the soldiers were reduced to eating grass.[17].

Nevertheless, the 2/28th Infantry remained in its position as a unit. They stayed because they were ordered to stay, and even in their exhausted condition their morale remained high. Both officers and men shared a strong, common sense of unit identity because the Japanese regimental system of recruiting drew men from the same towns and villages into a unit, providing homogeneity within a battalion or company. They were, in effect, extended neighbors as civilians and as soldiers they cared about each other and shared hardship and triumph together.[18] Their commanding officer and junior officers bonded the unit together. Lastly, although subject to daily Soviet shelling and the galling spectacle of impertinent Soviet soldiers bathing in the Halha River while they lacked drinking water, the 2/28th Infantry could see other Japanese units on both flanks

and knew that it was part of a comprehensive defense plan.

Against that backdrop of misery, resupply and replacements became major events. On 8 August a first lieutenant, detached from another of the regiment's battalions, led eight enlisted troops to the 2/28th Infantry's lines. The desperately ill could then be sent to the rear. But re-supplying and replacing troops under Soviet observation were a deadly business.

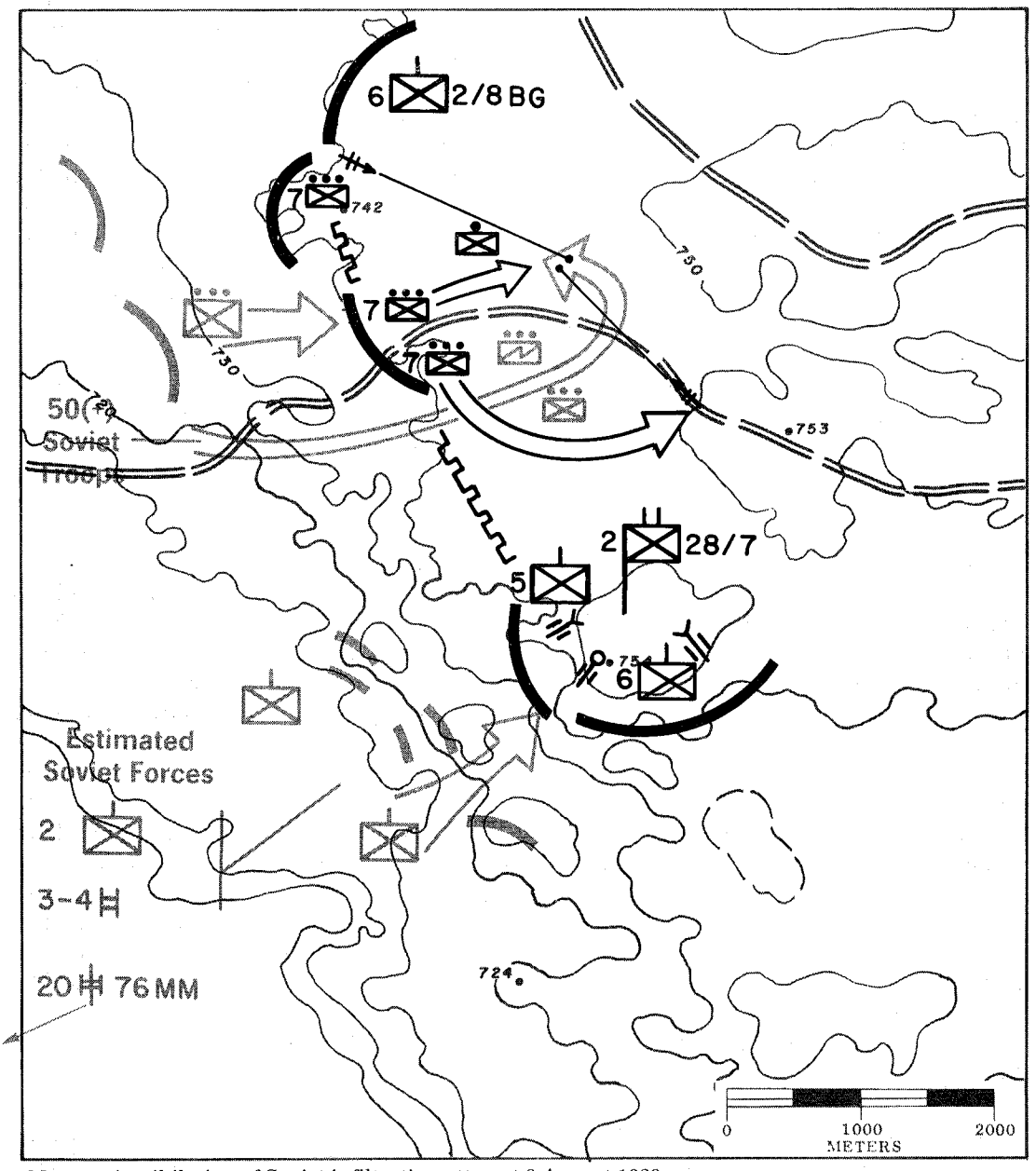
Most replenishment was accomplished at night. Infantrymen moving forward as replacements knew enough to be quiet and teamsters could be told to maintain silence. On the poor trails leading to the battalion lines, however, momentarily frightened horses (and horse-drawn transport or pack animals carried the bulk of frontline re-supply) could rear and neigh revealing the supply column's approach and bringing Soviet artillery down on it. These resupply columns, toiling in darkness, performed their vital logistics functions in anonymity and suffered their casualties without fanfare. By battle's end, one of every four of these service troops would be dead or wounded.

Unit morale remained high, according to the Japanese perception, because of the skillful leadership exhibited by battalion officers. The Japanese, moreover, were able to punish their foes and to inflict more damage than they suffered. That very afternoon 5th Company patrols turned back about fifteen enemy soldiers probing their defenses. Furthermore, the Japanese were able to strike deadly reprisals against Soviet troops. The 7th Company engaged in such a killer operation on 8 August.

Scouts from 7th Company shadowed the would-be Soviet infiltrators first detected by First Lieutenant Saito. They appeared to be an artillery observation squad with an infantry security platoon. Officers rapidly maneuvered their tired soldiers in predawn darkness to surround the Soviet force. One Japanese heavy machine gun on Hill 742 was pointed west and trained on the north Soviet flank while another machine gun 800 meters away enfiladed the exposed Soviet south flank. The neighboring Sugitani Battalion[19] provided standby fire support and a platoon of 7th Company moved to attack positions just south of the sand dunes behind which the Soviets thought they were securely hiding. (See Map 15.)

The Soviets' first realization that something was terribly wrong came when Japanese machine gun bullets began to rip into their perimeter from both flanks. Battalion artillery slammed high explosive shells one after the other into the bunched enemy troops. Fire lifted only when thirteen Japanese troops rushed the Soviet position and finished off the survivors with swords and bayonets. More than fifty Soviet bodies were counted and the Japanese took only a single prisoner. While unit accounts maintain that the Soviets resisted to the last man, it seems more likely that a platoon of 7th Company repaid some old scores in cold blood and steel that morning.

Sweeping the killing ground, Japanese troops recovered twenty rifles, three light machine guns, a sniper rifle, and twenty pieces of various field telephone equipment suggesting that about one-third of the Soviets were unarmed or were not combat infantrymen. They were all killed just the same.



Map 15. Annihilation of Soviet infiltration attempt 8 August 1939.

Speed and surprise were the hallmarks of this action. The Japanese viewed it as proof of their doctrine of attack and exemplary of the spirit of attack inculcated in platoon leaders' ranks and below. It came to be regarded as a classic example of plugging infiltration gaps on an extended front.[20]

Both combatants having spent and bloodied themselves, they spent 9 August in comparative tranquility. Soviet troops kept active strengthening fortifications around Moko Heights and sending in more reinforcements. Atop Hill 754 Japanese officers scanning the area with binoculars felt that the Soviets were moving sizable forces south into position against Colonel Morita's 71st Infantry, the extreme left flank of all Japanese positions south of the Holsten.

At dusk 200 replacements arrived to fill the battalion's losses caused by combat and sickness. As the newcomers exchanged news and gossip with the tired veterans, battalion headquarters divided up the replacements and formed a battalion reserve. Besides the fairly peaceful day and the reinforcements, rain provided more fresh water. That night battalion morale was uniformly high.

On 10 August Soviet artillery was active throughout the day, but the previous intensity was lacking. It was harassing fire which indeed did make existence miserable for the Japanese. The comparative lull also gave higher headquarters time to decide new dispositions for the 2/28th Infantry.

The 3d Platoon, 5th Company, was assigned to general reserve for the Hasebe Unit and left the battalion's control. Around Hill 742, Second Lieutenant Takashima's platoon of 7th Company and the Sugitani Battalion attempted to harden their defenses on that vital hill. The separation of battalion sectors of responsibility just north of 742 was proving detrimental to the overall Japanese defense because neither unit had the authority to overrule the other. To try to remedy matters, Colonel Hasebe ordered both units to coordinate their artillery fire plans, to clear firing lanes for mutual defense, and to produce an integrated firing plan linked to fire support from antitank, battalion, and regimental artillery. After the harrowing experience of 7 August, more effort went into constructing fortifications. Working parties were sent back to Chiangchunmiao to cut trees and to get logs that would be used to reinforce trench fortifications.

The fine weather of 11 August lifted the troops' spirits, but higher headquarters quickly lowered them by ordering the battalion's attached 37-mm company to return to the 71st Infantry. This loss, the only antitank weapons the battalion possessed, was serious in itself, but the manner in which the orders had to be carried out must have made the infantryman wonder who, if anybody, on the staff knew the real frontline situation.

Major Kajikawa reluctantly told the 37-mm crews to prepare to move that night. Regimental headquarters called again and, with orders described as "unfortunate" in the unit history, prescribed that the guns be shifted as quickly as possible. Kajikawa realized that if the Soviets detected the daylight move of the 37-mm guns, it would jeopardize his defenses. His fears were confirmed when Soviet artillery began shelling the gun crews who were trying to limber their weapons for transfer.

One of the defender's sharpest claws had been pulled by his own headquarters.

There were other worries too. Enemy 45-mm guns newly situated on Moko Heights announced their presence with sporadic registration shelling the battalion's south flank until nightfall. To the north, 2d Platoon, 7th Company, beat back yet another enemy probe near their lines atop Hill 742. Japanese casualties for the day-long skirmish again were recorded as "insignificant." That word, "insignificant," appears more and more frequently after mid-August.

Numerically, "insignificant" may have meant 3 or 4 percent casualties. Certainly these were not crippling losses, but as a staff officer observed shortly after the battle, after one month of such warfare of attrition, the entire Japanese force would have been annihilated.[21] An analysis of battle casualties showed that slightly over half the Japanese killed and wounded (51 and 53 percent respectively) fell to artillery fire. A year before at Changkufeng, about 37 percent of Japanese casualties resulted from Soviet artillery.[22]

Constant shelling not only whittled away Japanese strength. Shelling and patrolling also helped to distract Japanese attention by drowning out sounds of Soviet troop movement, all of which were accomplished at night. Almost daily Soviet patrols poked and probed for weaknesses in the Japanese defenses. On 13 August, for example, at 0200 a squad of fifteen enemy crept to within fifty meters of 6th Company's front lines before grenade dischargers drove them off. This was another nuisance probe that interrupted a night's sleep. Hill 742 also remained active as 2d Platoon, 7th Company, pushed back about ten enemy infiltrators. These infiltration attempts, in turn, highlighted the difficulties of an understrength company trying to defend a 1,000-meter front.[23]

It was cloudy on 13 August. Strong northwest winds blew sand into foxholes and faces making it almost impossible to see anything. Then it rained, which at least provided fresh water. Regimental artillery blasted at suspected Soviet positions on and off throughout the day. The 2/28th Infantry's heavy machine gun crews tried to disrupt movement in the enemy's communication trenches, but with little success. The Japanese also deliberately fired on Soviet lines when they thought the enemy troops would be eating. An interrupted meal was payment for interrupted sleep. And every day another 3 or 4 percent of the Japanese soldiers became casualties in this battle of attrition.

In the early morning rain of 14 August, Soviet artillery gunners began to shell the battalion's lines in a comparatively deliberate, almost leisurely manner. Section by section a methodical box barrage walked over the battalion's position. Infantrymen crouching in foxholes or machine gun crews in unreinforced shelters could only wait for the methodical shelling to pass over their holes to the next section.

While no change in the enemy situation was apparent to Major Kajikawa and his company commanders, they did notice frequent enemy truck traffic on the Halha's west bank and, on a more ominous note, a great deal of enemy movement south of the battalion's left flank. This activity may have been part of the Soviet deception effort

designed to condition the Japanese to the sound of armor and the sight of moving vehicles. Ten days or so before the Soviet offensive, a number of Soviet trucks without mufflers were driven along the entire front.[24]

Next morning, 15 August, in the mist and falling rain, the Soviets first used mortars against the 2/28th Infantry. At 1000 mortar shells began exploding on the 6th and 7th Company positions as Soviet crews calibrated their weapons. Grenadiers from 6th Company returned the enemy fire and silenced the mortars temporarily, but around noon enemy 45-mm guns near Moko Heights began shelling 6th Company lines. Later during the cloudy, rainy day enemy mortars resumed pounding 5th and 6th Companies. The battalion's 70-mm guns responded but the Soviets seemed to have at least eight mortars in action against the battalion.

Rain changed to a cold drizzle during the night and Japanese troops shivered in their trenches. At 0900 on 16 August enemy mortar fire erupted from Moko Heights and slammed into 2d Platoon, 6th Company, lines. The company commander called for battalion artillery support and directed the two howitzers' fire against the mortars. At noon Soviet 45-mm guns on Moko Heights began firing on 6th Company positions. Again battalion artillery received a hurried call for support. This time they claimed that counterbattery fire destroyed an enemy gun. At 1600 enemy mortars again fired from the same location, but Japanese battalion artillery managed to destroy an enemy observation post and possibly a mortar gun crew.

That night Second Lieutenant Tahara of 5th Company led NCO scouts from 6th Company to reconnoiter Soviet positions around Moko Heights, source of the most effective enemy artillery fire. Tahara discovered a reinforced platoon of about sixty Soviets fortifying the heights, but the enemy outposts and sentries were extremely alert and reacted to the slightest sound or movement, something previously not seen in Soviet night defense positions.

During Tahara's absence, another fifty replacements arrived at battalion headquarters. These men filled the depleted ranks as "normal wastage," to use the World War I euphemism, continued to feed the insatiable maw of this battle of attrition. Morale, however, was still high, possibly because according to battalion rumors the unit would return to its base by mid-September.[25]

On 17 August Soviet troops tried to fortify the rises between 7th Company on Hill 742 and 5th Company on Hill 754. At 0900 a battalion artillery forward observer serving with 6th Company detected an enemy mortar squad trying to set up their weapon about 500 meters west of 5th Company lines. Battalion artillery fire forced the enemy quickly to withdraw. In the afternoon battalion artillery smashed an enemy observation post atop a rise about 600 meters west of 7th Company's positions. That prompted Soviet retaliatory artillery fire and both sides exchanged barrages. The Japanese, almost predictably, suffered "light casualties."

Night Attack II

The enemy was also active around Bosa Heights, approximately 200 meters from 6th Company's front line. To

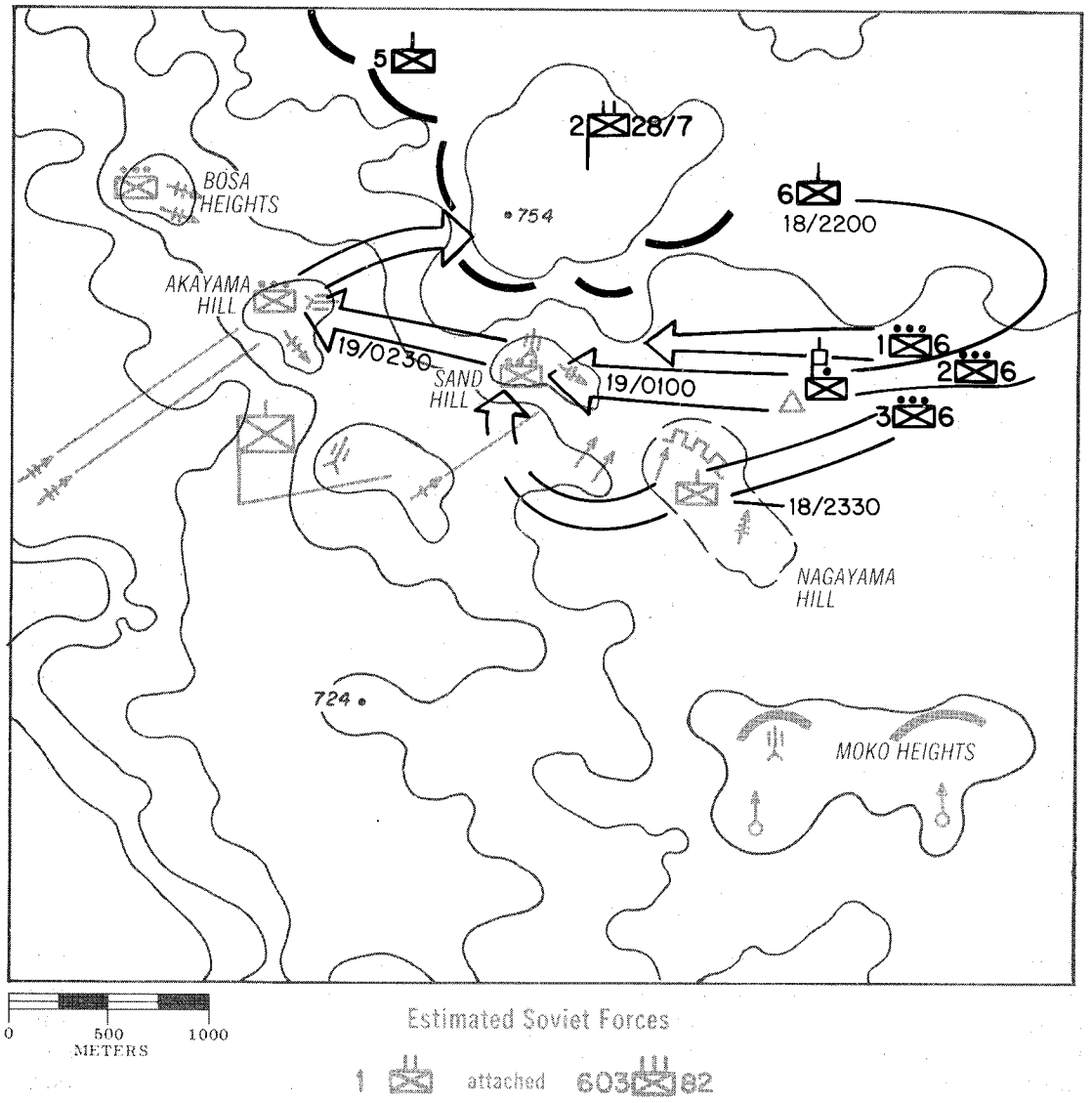
determine the enemy strength, Captain Tsuji, the company commander, sent a patrol out after dark to scout that area but again Soviet security and vigilance prevented a thorough, close-in reconnaissance of the position. The scouts did report that at the very least the enemy had established a skirmish line atop Bosa Heights and enemy forces probably were positioned in depth.

These scouts were discovering, although they could not know it, the signs of another shift in Soviet tactics. The enemy forward line was the weakest point of a position defended in width and depth. Japanese attackers could easily reach and break through that defense, but then they would encounter hardened defenses with interlocking bands of fire. Soviet artillery had also pre-registered its fire on this outpost line and as soon as the Japanese occupied the outpost line the Soviets would commence firing on them.[26] Japanese scouts also overheard the sounds of hammers, picks, saws, and other construction tools indicating that the Soviets were building new fortifications. According to Soviet accounts, powerful transmitters capable of emitting sound effects imitating construction noises were part of their deception efforts.[27] The purpose remained unclear to the Japanese, but the enemy was planning something.

Based on scouts' information, on 18 August Captain Tsuji informed Major Kajikawa that the enemy seemed to be preparing for some new action. To foil this plan, to reduce meaningless Japanese casualties, and thereby to enhance combat capability for future operations, he requested Kajikawa's permission to launch a night spoiling raid on the Soviet positions. Authorization was granted and Tsuji spent the day making preparations to lead the night attack. Troops wrapped their hobnail boots in cloth or straw or discarded them in favor of web-toed rubber soled socks to muffle sounds. They stuffed their ammunition pouches with paper, filled their canteens, and sharpened their bayonets. Tsuji donned a crossed white belt over his shoulders for the troops to guide on. His platoon leaders wore a single sash for recognition.[28] At 2200, further concealed by falling rain, Tsuji led the company through its front lines along with elements from the rest of the battalion augmenting the raiding force. Tsuji was in the point squad followed by 1st and 3d Platoons in column with 2d Platoon as reserve bringing up the rear. (See Map 16.)

Advancing slowly in the darkness, the point squad unexpectedly bumped into an enemy outpost where none was thought to be. As became clear during the action, the Soviets had adjusted their positions during the thirty-six hour lag between the Japanese reconnaissance and night attack. Soviet riflemen fired several rounds in the general direction of the raiders and the price for the delay between the reconnaissance and the actual operation was paid.

Tsuji, still hoping to capitalize on the little element of surprise still his, ordered 3d Platoon to assault the skirmish line on Nagayama Hill. Instantly 3d Platoon went on line and charged the hill. Soviet heavy and light machine guns opened an ear-shattering volume of fire. But since the Japanese attackers continued up the hill in silence, most of the Soviet automatic weapons fire sailed well over the crouching attackers' heads. As Japanese infantrymen reached the crest of Nagayama, a hailstorm of Soviet hand



Map 16. 6th Company, 2/28th Infantry, night attack on Soviet positions 18—19 August 1939.

grenades greeted them and concussion, blast, and fragments caused more casualties than the automatic weapons fire. The Soviets had reacted too late as the Japanese infantrymen leaped into the trenches and shot or bayoneted those enemy soldiers who did not hastily withdraw.

Captain Tsuji, meanwhile, was trying to execute his original plan. He ordered 2d Platoon to seize enemy machine gun and 45-mm antitank gun positions on a sand mound about 400 meters to his north. As 2d Platoon assaulted the enemy's left flank, 3d Platoon swung around from Nagayama and hit the enemy's right. Again the Soviets opened a violent storm of automatic weapons and heavy machine gun fire and flung grenades at flickering shadows. Both Japanese platoons again withheld any counterfire and continued to advance silently, guiding on their platoon leaders' backs. When they had closed to within a few meters of the Soviet frontline, with a half scream, half battle cry, they leaped into the enemy trenches slashing and bayoneting the Soviet defenders there.

But Soviet defenses were no longer linear like those encountered at Changkufeng/Lake Khasan. Instead the enemy placed his automatic weapons in depths 500 to 1000 meters behind the initial defensive line. This enabled the Soviets to provide punishing covering fire in lanes while Soviet troops withdrew to new fighting positions. Moreover, physically and psychologically drained by the experience of hand-to-hand combat at the Soviet first line, the Japanese attackers had great difficulty regrouping and pressing on against the next line of Soviet defenses. The Japanese concentrated grenade discharger fire to suppress enemy automatic weapons fire just before a dash forward. This tactic was an expedient, but effective, one.

Tsuji then used the exhausted survivors of 3d Platoon's two attacks as a security force to cover yet another attack by the 1st and 2d Platoons against Akayama Hill, about 300 meters north of the recently taken Sand Hill. Soviet troops just evicted from Sand Hill, however, regrouped on Akayama and added their numbers to the defense to make a combined strength of perhaps 300 enemy troops.

The company fired all its grenade dischargers simultaneously to blast the Soviet trenches and especially to disrupt Soviet troops who might be entrenched on the reverse slope. Flares and tracer rounds from Soviet lines lit up the night sky as a platoon led by Captain Tsuji tried to capitalize on the shock of the grenade dischargers by turning the enemy flank. With this diversion, the main Japanese attack fell on the weakly held Soviet front. Swords and bayonets plunged into flesh and bone and the surviving enemy troops retreated into their prepared defenses. There the Soviets fought tenaciously, making the Japanese pay for the initial success.

Second Lieutenant Nakano, leading 1st Platoon into the prepared enemy defenses, used his sword to slash at enemy defenders, but a Soviet rifleman ducked underneath it and bayoneted the lieutenant, mortally wounding him. Tsuji was the only Japanese officer standing as both 2d and 3d Platoon leaders also fell wounded. Soviet artillery fired to the Japanese rear to try to isolate the raiders in no-man's land until dawn. Finally, the Soviets withdrew into the darkness and Japanese scouts

sent in pursuit reported that the enemy apparently had fled.

It was about 0230 when Tsuji ordered the weary troops to regroup, police the battlefield, and prepare to withdraw to company lines. Collection of the seven dead and twenty-two wounded Japanese was especially difficult because the use of flares to illuminate shadows and depressions where wounded crawled to escape enemy fire brought Soviet artillery fire down on the Japanese. As the battalion aide-de-camp pointed out, "As distasteful and agonizing as it was, the collection of our dead and wounded had to be accomplished," because leaving the bodies of comrades in arms to rot on the battlefield would have a very adverse influence on morale.[29] In addition reassembling the scattered Japanese security patrols and casualty collection teams proved difficult because any signal to indicate reassembly points immediately provoked Soviet artillery fire.

Back inside company lines, the raiders assessed their night's work. At least eighty soldiers had been killed and ten rifles, three light and two heavy machine guns captured. Overall the raid was deemed a success, indeed it was later touted as a model of night attack based on offensive spirit.[30] But battalion officers felt, in retrospect, that it would have been better for the entire company in one concentrated attack to destroy completely one enemy strongpoint than for the three fragmented platoons to conduct separate attacks.

It was still raining the morning of 19 August but even in the cold rain the troops were in high spirits. They had struck a hard blow at the Soviets, so hard that the day passed quietly.[31] Only a few isolated firefights marred the tranquility. Around dusk platoons of 7th Company fired with grenade dischargers and light machine guns on about 100 enemy troops who were moving toward the battalion's lines. The enemy quickly dispersed. Later, around 2300, Soviet troops suddenly fired long, loud bursts of machine gun rounds into a depression that was well forward of 6th Company's lines. Then hand grenades began to explode in front of the Soviet positions. Members of 6th Company atop Hill 754 watched in fascination and then realized that the jittery Soviet troops thought the Japanese were attacking them and were in fact firing at shadows. That provoked prolonged laughter among the Japanese infantrymen. On 20 August, the next morning, the Soviets would have their turn.

Unable to dislodge the Soviets, the Kwantung Army could not disengage from the battle without seriously damaging its credibility as a deterrent force to Soviet expansion in northeastern Asia. In that sense, Kwantung Army Headquarters had to commit Lieutenant General Komatsubara's forces to a battle of attrition. During the first three weeks of August, the 2/28th Infantry's experiences typified those of the Japanese forces around Nomonhan/Khalkhin Gol. They dug in, fought, and died. They were, as the laconic War Diary entry put it, "in contact with the enemy."